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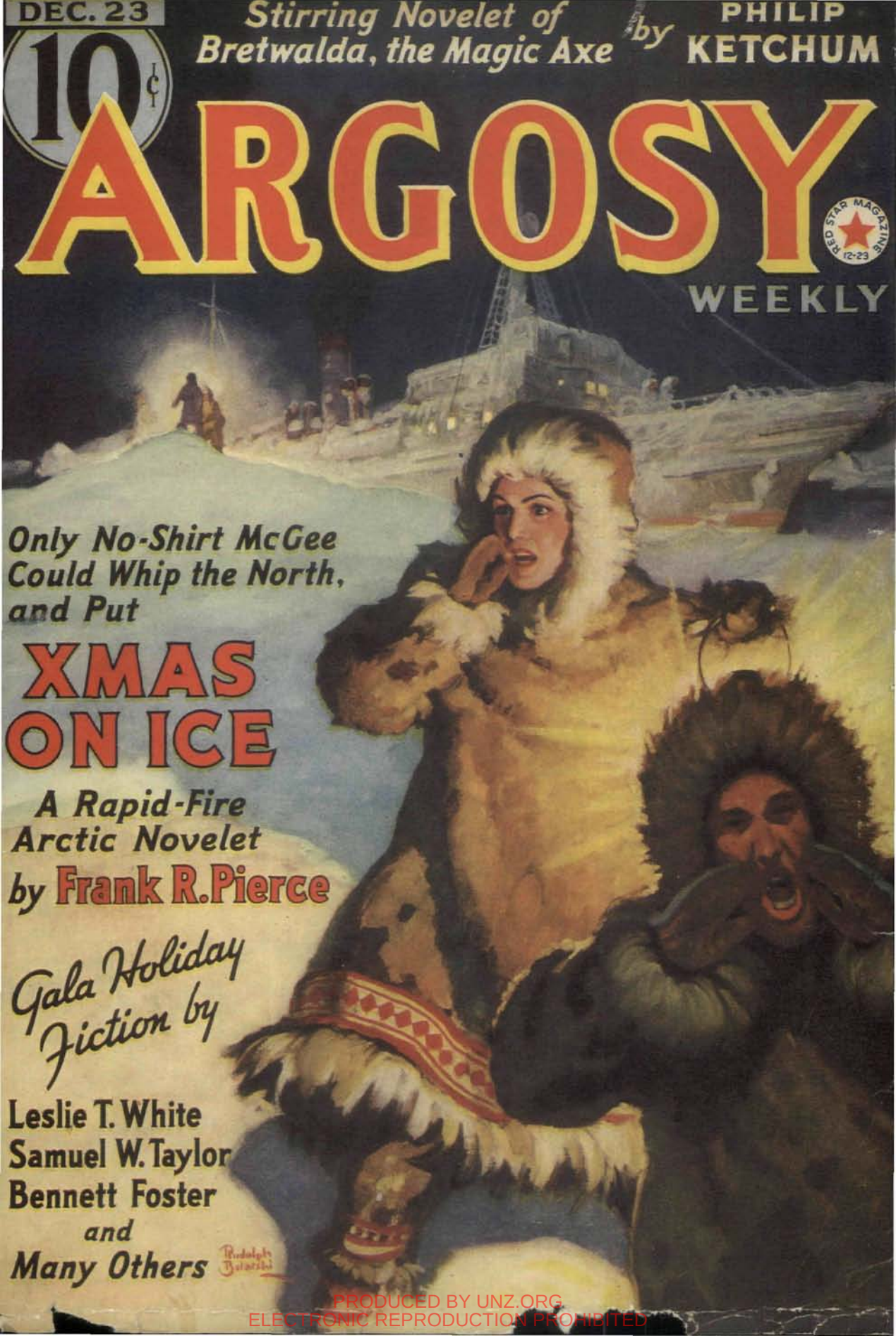
Stirring Novelet of Bretwalda, the Magic Axe by PHILIP KETCHUM

ARGOSY

RED STAR MAGAZINE 12-23

WEEKLY



Only No-Shirt McGee Could Whip the North, and Put

XMAS ON ICE

A Rapid-Fire Arctic Novelet by Frank R. Pierce

Gala Holiday Fiction by

Leslie T. White
Samuel W. Taylor
Bennett Foster
and
Many Others

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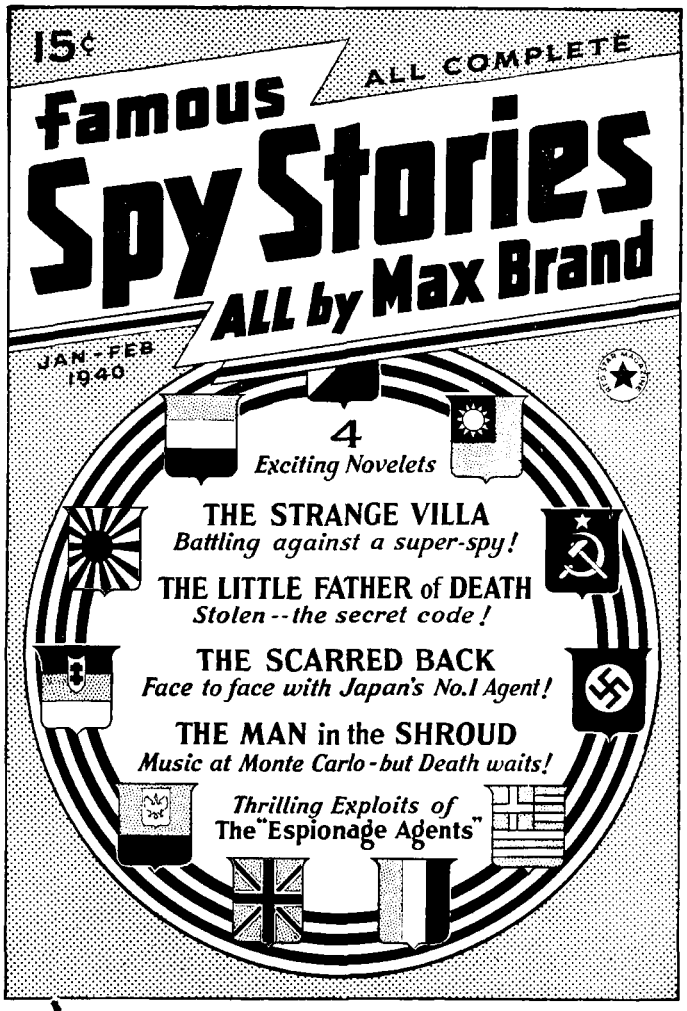

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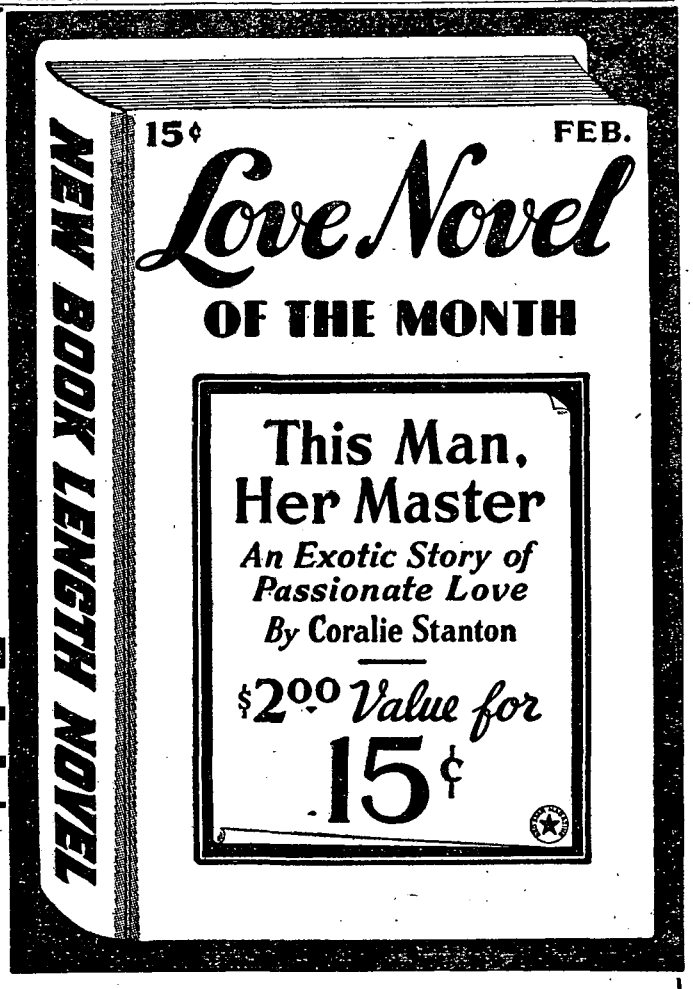

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Christmas on Ice

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Author of "Tin Money," "Pinch Hitter McGee," etc.

What is realism, Daddy? Realism, my son, is when a Hollywood studio sends a troupe of Kleig-dizzy actors up North in the dead of winter to become ice-bound, so that they may interpret the emotions of frozen castaways . . . And what did Santa Claus bring them, Daddy? Santa Claus brought them frayed nerves, chillblains, and attempted murder. Then he dropped No-Shirt McGee down the chimney to keep the peace

I

Good evening, everybody. This is Peter Piper, your Hollywood whisperer, bringing Vine Street to the microphone. Well, here is a big, juicy radish to Moe Katz and Super-Fine Production for planting the phoniest publicity gag ever conceived, in an attempt to save the cost of the film on their forthcoming floppola, Icebound. As we told you—and exclusively—six or seven weeks ago, Moe Katz is a sick man, his picture's ever sicker, and pretty soon the banks will be stuck with what was once Filmland's top-flight studio. Icebound has got to be terrific—or else.

To date, the picture has had more candidates for the leading female role than Gone with the Wind. The director has been changed four times. Three scenarios have been torn up. And all to no avail.

So Moe Katz, that genius of the headlines, has dreamed up a little scheme that he thinks will keep his fillum on the front pages until it lands in your favorite theater. According to studio gossip, the idea is to send the entire cast up into the Arctic regions and film the picture against its

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natural background. Katz is said to have dug up an old-time sourdough to act as technical director, and the company is to start at once.

Well, to these keen old nostrils that gag is strictly from hunger. And we'd like to remind Moe Katz that the day of publicity hoaxes is over. Nobody's going to fall for that one, Moe—and the kickback you will get may be terrific.

And now, folks, for tonight's fourteen-karat picture . . .

ME AND Bulldozer Craig are down in Hollywood where I'm actin' as technical adviser—that means gettin' money for givin' advice that most often don't get took—on a Northern picture; and he is lookin' at the girls and blowin' his hard-earned money. My job's about done when the director, Bill van Parks, says: "No-Shirt, go over to Super-Fine Studios, see Moe Katz, and tell him what's wrong with a picture he's takin' called *Icebound*."

"And while I'm tellin' him what's wrong—providin' I know what's wrong—what'll he be tellin' me?"

"He'll probably be telling you you're hired," Bill answers. "They're having a lot of trouble with the picture and nobody seems to know why. You heard Piper last night, didn't you?" He smiles. "It might develop into a real job."

He was right. It developed into a real job and more grief than I'd met up with since the day I swiped Two-Story Hogan's squaw on the Moose Creek stampede.

Me and Bulldozer went over to Super-Art and asked for Moe Katz. His secretary, whom Bulldozer promptly does a few small nip-ups over, told us he was in the projection room lookin' at some of the *Icebound* rushes.

We set down and wait until the rushes are projected and the lights go on. Then a little nervous guy jumps up and yells: "The picture smells. You're breakin' my heart. All of you. Phooie on you all. Phooie on me. Take the fillum out and burn it."

"Mr. Katz," Moran Gilder warns, "remember! You shouldn't get excited. Remember your heart."

"I shouldn't get excited?" His face grows purple, and he beats his breast with

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his skinny hands. "With my business tumblin' down around my ears, and you tell me I shouldn't get excited. Am I a Nero who fiddles when the deck is burning?"

"It was the boy who stood on the burning deck," Moran Gilder says. "Nero fiddled when Rome burned."

"Rome or a ship, what's the difference, he wasn't doin' nothin' to find out what was wrong." Then Moe Katz sees us. "Ah! A couple of spies from another studio! Or maybe columnists who'll publish a column askin' when Super-Fine will release another good picture." He turns to the studio cop and yells, "Throw these bums out!"

ME AND Bulldozer don't even get sore. We'd read what the columnists had been sayin' about him. They'd said he was slippin' and the old fire that had driven him to make four-star pictures was gone. "I'm No-Shirt McGee," I tell him. "And this is my pardner, Bulldozer Craig."

"Why didn't you say so?" he hotly demands. "You saw them rushes. Lousy, eh? They smell, eh? I'll give you a thousand dollars cash money if you tell me why they smell. I'll give you a job if you will help me turn out a four-star picture. Or even a three-star one. Which shows I'm so desperate I don't know which way to turn."

"What's the story about?" I ask him. "I couldn't exactly tell from them scenes."

He waves the others out of the projection room. "These characters are icebound in the Arctic," he tells me. "They can't escape. They're city people, used to all kinds of comforts. When they get bored they go somewhere. But up there they can't. Two muggs love the same girl. They fight. Everybody's ready to kill somebody else. And a man is murdered and . . . the idea is basic emotions unleashed. That's the way the author put it. Now what's wrong?"

"It ain't convincin'," Bulldozer says.

"I told the author that and he got mad," Moe Katz said.

That thousand-dollar offer looked pretty good to me. So I took a deep breath and came up with the following:

"The story's all right. But the actors haven't ever been icebound city folks. They don't know the emotions of city folks who've been imprisoned in the ice. They can't realize how scared people can get when they realize they're trapped and can't do anything about it. It makes 'em feel sick all over to know they can't pick up a telephone and call a specialist if they're injured; nor a corner grocery if they're hungry."

I was only stallin', see? Killin' time until maybe I could deliver something to earn that cash. But the little guy's so nearly nuts about his picture, he takes me serious.

"By golly!" Moe exclaims. "Who'd ever thought a guy like you'd put his finger on the trouble. Now, tell me the answer?"

"I'm no moving picture producer, but it seems to me if you flew the company to Nome, chartered a schooner and sent it into the ice, and made everybody think they was icebound, then you'd have somethin'." I was stuck with it now. I figured he'd forget all about it in a couple of days, though. "It'd cost money, but your actors would know how trapped people felt when the ice closes in. And you'd get some swell shots of the pack ice besides. You might even shoot the entire picture up there. The press agents would like that."

"So you've been hangin' 'round Hollywood long enough to know the value of press agents, eh?" he says. "It'd cost plenty," he continues, "but we'd get it back in publicity. And if we could send out a news story and make 'em believe the schooner was really trapped in the ice, the publicity would be worth millions." Then suddenly he looks scared. "Suppose the schooner really *was* trapped? Then what?"

"You'd get a story and picture that'd curl your hair," Bulldozer predicted. I tried to shut him up, without any success.

"I ain't got much hair to curl," Moe

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says. He don't have to point that out.

"That's exactly what I'm drivin' at," Bulldozer explains. "The picture would curl even *your* hair. But don't worry, those Arctic skippers know the ice. They won't get trapped."

"Always," Moe Katz tells us, "I sleep on an idea. I'll sleep on this one, and let you know what I decide to do. But you told me what was wrong with my picture, so you get a thousand dollars anyway. And maybe later, a contract . . ."

I began to figure: what can I lose? Maybe the idea wasn't so nutty as I thought. Katz knew more about the movie business than I did.

"If I get a contract," I tell him, "it'll be on a sliding scale basis. Four-star picture, four-star money. One-star picture, one-star money. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough," Moe agrees.

"Bulldozer Craig goes along, too," I tell him.

"Sure," Moe agrees. "Maybe we'll need a dishwasher, or another heavy."

II

. . . Well, people, maybe Mrs. Piper's big boy Peter should be blushing from shame for calling that Icebound location trip to the Arctic a phoney, or maybe our broadcast the other midnight just called Moe Katz's bluff and left him stuck with it. Because, anyway the company, headed by Helen Hewitt—who ought to know better than to get herself mixed up in such a frameup—has actually left for points north. Our guess is that the troupe will come straggling back home in a couple of weeks to spend Christmas in the Brown Derby laughing at the dopey columnists who fell for such a raw one.

Helen Hewitt, by the way, is said to be that way, doubled in spades, over Van Lambert who plays an important role in the film. The story is one of those hush-hush things—and if it's true don't forget you heard it here first—but would it be coincidence that the charming blonde lady of all your hearts was reported engaged to Harry Cormer and then to Philip Brookside, when they had leading roles in two of her previous films? Or would it?

Final choice for the lead in the Icebound turkey is Denny Caldwell, ex-halfback on the California Polecats. And to our way of thinking Denny's promising career is threatened with a big setback by his getting mixed up in Super-Fine's prize clambake.

And—flash of flashes—who else do you think is going on the Icebound trek? It's just come in and if this doesn't stamp the whole thing as a four-star false alarm, what would? Leading the expedition will be none other than . . .

AT FIVE o'clock the followin' mornin' the telephone rings. Bulldozer don't even hear it he's sleepin' that hard, but I answer it. It's Moe Katz. "I tried sleepin' on that idea," he says, "and it kept me awake. It's a deal. Catch the early mornin' plane for Seattle. Call at the bank there and you'll find a credit. Charter a plane, fly to Nome and charter a schooner. Load her with grub and have her ready for us. Better have a special generator installed so we can have plenty of juice for lights if we need 'em. That's all."

Well that's the way they do things in Hollywood sometimes. And it was just as well this was one of those times because I happened to remember the open season in the Arctic would be gettin' near the end.

I woke up Bulldozer and told him the news then we packed, went out and had breakfast and boarded a cab for the airport. The tickets were ready for us when we got there.

A few minutes later we was streakin' North hell-bent for election.

As soon as we're in the air I ask the pilot to radio Boeing Field in Seattle and line up someone to fly us to Nome. An hour later he reports a Fairbanks plane which had brought a sick man out was just taking off for home but would wait for us.

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"Horseshoes are sure hangin' all over us" Bulldozer says. "We're plenty lucky."

"I'd sooner have some of this luck later on," I tell him. I was voicin' a prayer and didn't know it. I was feelin' like a man who prayed for rain and got the Johnstown flood.

Nothin' happened on the flight to Nome. Nothin' happened at Nome either.

The *Polar Night*, a typical Arctic tradin' schooner, is just back from a Siberian cruise and her owners are tickled to death to charter her to the Super-Fine outfit. "All you have to do," I explain, "is to go into the ice and make everybody on board believe we're caught and won't get out again until next year. That's simple as shootin' fish in a barrel."

The skipper agrees and starts takin' aboard supplies that afternoon. She's built to carry a few passengers if you ain't too particular about small cabins and narrow bunks. The skipper agrees to let Helen Hewitt have his cabin when he finds out she's *Icebound's* star.

Several days later a big transport job lands back of Nome and the first man to step out is Van Lambert. He's a handsome brute with a million-dollar face and a billion-dollar ego. He's meaner'n sin and has the disposition of a settin' hen most of the time. He's the blond type with a military bearin'. You've seen him in slick uniforms, oglin' the girls in a captured town. Or maybe tossin' off a toast and bustin' the glass against the fireplace.

"What a hole," he says, lookin' at Nome. "McGee, you should be boiled in oil for recommending this plan to Moe Katz. What are we supposed to do around here? Good Lord, haven't you any respect for your fellowman?"

"Depends on the feller," I answer. "I'd like to bet Moe Katz gets a picture that'll make him a million dollars." He didn't show any signs of takin' the bet, so we ride in silence to the hotel, where he squawks about his room. "Let him squawk," I tell the hotel man. Lambert must have heard me.

The others on the plane are cameramen, electricians and such. They've got a lot of their equipment stowed in baggage compartments and passenger space. The plane takes off right away to fly more equipment and people north.

SEVERAL days pass, then it comes back, followed by a couple of others. I see Denny Caldwell lookin' out of the plane window as it lands, and he's grinnin' from ear to ear. He's goin' to play the lead in the picture. This is his first real chance and he's like a kid out of school.

Denny's no Don Juan. He's a big, rugged cuss—the kind that fell over his own feet when he was a kid. And a swell mugg to have on your side in a fight. He stands six feet, weighs a hundred and eighty pounds, and looks as if his feet was well planted in the ground. He's almost homely, but you forget that when he smiles. He's got big, strong even teeth, black hair and eyes and it takes a lot to stir him up. When he's stirred, it takes a lot to cool him off.

Van Lambert claims Denny is a tramp athlete who can't act. Denny agrees with him and is cheerful about it. Denny jumps out of the plane and looks around. He takes a couple of deep breaths of the bracin' air and says, "What a country! Elbow room up here. Say, I'd like to go prospecting back in those hills."

"A lot of gold came out of them," I answered, "and more came from the old beaches, too. You should've seen this camp in the early days."

"I'd liked to have seen it, No-Shirt," he answers. "Sorry I wasn't born then."

At that moment Helen Hewitt comes out of a plane. Denny takes a long look and says, "No, I'll take that back. I'm glad I'm living today."

"Huh," Bulldozer grunts, "that cuss is in love with her."

"Which stamps him as normal in anybody's language," I tell him.

"I predict I'll be normal myself in a few days," Bulldozer drawls. Then he goes over to see if there ain't somethin' she wants.

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In her pictures, you'll remember, Helen Hewitt is one of those dainty blondes men always want to protect. She looks too frail for the rigors of life. It always turns out she's able to stand on her own hind legs, and even give a helpin' hand to somebody else. That's Helen in real life, too. She's got the biggest blue eyes you ever saw, and they're full of spit and brimstone.

She's only twenty-two but already she's sent two of her former leading men to stardom by letting them steal a big chunk of a picture from her. And because she's warm-hearted and generous, she has plenty of friends in high places. Press agents have her engaged to every man who played opposite her. It was part of their buildup. But I learned from Moe Katz that she's secretly engaged to Van Lambert.

"I hope to put off the weddin'," he told me, "because the millions who adore Van as a great big beautiful heel won't stand for it."

"Holy smoke!" Bulldozer almost sobs. "Do you mean to say she's goin' to marry that false alarm? I suppose she can't have looks and brains, too. Somethin' ought to be done about it. And I'm the man to bring her to her senses."

"Hold on," I warn, "we've got enough problems ahead of us, without you foolin' with the love life of Helen and Van."

"Don't care anything about that," Bulldozer snaps, "I ain't goin' to let her throw herself away on Van. Anyway, I get fat on trouble." He told me that in Los Angeles, and he said it again when Helen leaves the plane and Van ain't around to greet her. Anybody could see by lookin' around that she was expectin' him.

"Van's takin' his beauty sleep," Bulldozer says. "He'll be up in time for lunch."

"Party last night?" she asks with a grin.

"No," Bulldozer drawls, "the malemutes howled at the moon last night and kept him awake. Besides, he claims he can't go to bed when the sun's still shinin'. He don't like this country."

Then I get my shock. Moe Katz climbs out of the third plane. "Hello, Mr. No-Shirt," he says, "I'm goin' with you. The doctor says, 'Moe, you should go to Alaska where you can't read columns and be bothered by business. Besides, you should put the Katz touch on *Icebound.*' And here I am. Ain't you glad?"

"Sure," I said, lyin' like a gentleman, "I'm tickled to death." If there's one place a nervous, high-strung ex-genius shouldn't be, it's on an icebound ship.

III

. . . Well, well, well. If Super-Fine isn't still hard at work on that Icebound phoney. We just got a call from the masterminds at that lot's publicity department. They claim they received a fragmentary message from the Polar Night that the ship may be in serious difficulty. Suddenly the receiving set went dead. The press boys are too, too frantic. Are we rude to smell a large and smirking rat? Try another sucker, fellows; the Hollywood Whisperer has been in these parts for too long to . . .

MOE KATZ was followed by Moran Gilder, the director, who didn't seem to be very happy. The crushed gnat mustache he wore under his straight nose seemed to wilt. And the glossy black hair he kept slicked back was mussed up, as if he had been running his fingers through it on the Fairbanks-Nome leg of the flight.

"It couldn't be worse, No-Shirt," he groaned. "I did everything I could to stop him. Suppose we should be caught in the ice? Then what? We'll have a nervous wreck on our hands." He lowered his voice. "He might even become a mental case."

I kept from grinning. Only Moe Katz, the schooner's master and me and Bulldozer knew the schooner was to make a bluff at being icebound. "I think Moe will be equal to it," I said. "When the real test comes, the frailest men are sometimes the strongest. Besides, we aren't going

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to get caught in the ice. Captain Larson knows the ice."

"The best of 'em get caught," Gilder said. "You know that."

"But not very often," I insist. "We'll get some real ice shots, the actors will get the *feel* of the Arctic and everything will be okay." But I can see he's gloomy about the whole business.

We boarded the *Polar Night* the followin' mornin' and headed for the ice. In the days that follow we stop several times to get pictures of natives hunting white whales, killing walrus and seals. We've got seven natives aboard for atmosphere and to act as crew. They're young, and the chance to be in a motion picture makes a hit with 'em. They nearly break their necks to supply action. Later he tells me these boys are the pick of his former crews.

The Polar Night worms her way into the pack ice without much trouble and so far it is a lark. "How's this, Mr. Katz?" Larson asks Moe early one mornin'. "There's pack ice everywhere."

"It don't look like we're caught," Moe protests. "I can see ways out everywhere. Can't you fix it so we're close to a lot of noise?"

"Sure," Larson answers. "You want to see a couple of floas pilin' into each other. Give me a few more hours."

That night there's one pip of a crash, and I roll out of my bunk and nearly break my neck. There's somethin' soft under me and I find it's Moran Gilder. A cabin door opens and out pops Van Lambert. "What's the trouble?" Lambert growls. "Can't a man get a decent night's sleep?"

Bulldozer shows up, ready for any kind of action. Then he sees Helen in one of those shimmerin' pink things girls put on over their nightgowns. It fits plenty tight here, a little loose there, and is kinda revealin', specially because in the excitement a couple of loose ends has slipped. "Are we all right?" Helen asks.

"You bet we're all right," Bulldozer answers with feelin'.

"Craig, I resent that," Van Lambert says.

"It goes as said," Bulldozer snaps. "And if you want to make somethin' of it . . ."

"Gentlemen . . . please," Helen interrupts. "No-Shirt, what's happened?"

"The *Polar Night* shoved her bow into a floe," I answer, "nothin' dangerous. She's built for it."

THERE'S a nasty fog comin' over the ice and we can't see much except shattered ice alongside. It's colder'n all billy-be-damned and frost particles are glistenin' on the eskimos' parka hoods. The half-dressed whites hightail it back to their cabins to get into warm clothes.

Moe Katz comes out, almost lost in a parka. He's chucklin' all over. "No-Shirt," he says, "you picked a swell skipper. It won't be no trouble at all makin' 'em believe they're caught in the ice. I almost believe it myself. I like you. You're rare. You don't say yes to everything I say. You should be preserved in alcohol and stuck in a museum."

"He's pickled in alcohol right now," Bulldozer says.

The fog clears after breakfast and there's ice as far as we can see. "Helen," I say, figgerin' this is the time to toss in the bombshell, "and gentlemen. I've got bad news for you. We're trapped in the ice. This isn't a press-agent story. We're really caught. Captain Larson tells me he's goin' to try and fight his way out."

The silence was so thick you could cut it with a knife. "I don't mind," Denny Caldwell says, breaking the silence. "We've got plenty of grub, cameras and film. We can make a couple of features while we're up here."

"I don't like it," Van Lambert growls, "it was a fool idea in the first place. I don't need to come up here to portray the emotions of an ice-trapped man."

"Then I ask you," Gilder sharply demands, "why you didn't do it in the stuff we shot below. Holding out on me, eh?"

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"I hold out on nobody," Van Lambert savagely retorts. "I give my best. If others did the same, the picture would have been a success. Caldwell was wooden and . . ."

"Go ahead and say it, Van," Helen says, with that sweet, dangerous tone a girl can sometimes use, "I was flat. I knew it at the time."

"You were marvelous," Van said.

"That's one thing we can agree on, Lambert," Denny says. "The support, right down the line, was lousy."

Moe Katz rubs his hands gleefully. They're beginning to get on each other's nerves and he beams at me. But the time for shooting the big scenes is still ahead. Moe wants a little hate generated first. Raw emotions. And is he going to it?

They set up cameras on the ice when the sun was right, and shot pictures of the schooner trying to buck her way through to a lead. Bulldozer watches for several minutes and we both knew they were getting some thrilling stuff. "Say, No-Shirt," he says, "it strikes me he's givin' that schooner a beaut of a beatin' just for a few pictures. You don't suppose he's really caught, do you?"

"Heck . . . no," I answer. "Still . . ." The schooner backed away again and charged at the ice. It struck, smashed downward and looked as if it might get through. Then the ice below boiled up and she settled once more.

Slowly she backed out.

Captain Larson sent for me that night. "No-Shirt," he says, "you've got to know the truth. Unless I can get clear tomorrow, we're icebound for the winter."

"This is no time for kiddin', Larson."

"I'm not," he answers, and from the tone of his voice I know he's tellin' the truth. "The wind shifted and brought the pack ice down sooner'n I expected. You think we've been going deeper into the ice. You're wrong. For the past twenty-four hours I've been trying to get clear. The wind may change. If it doesn't . . ."

"If it don't," I answer, "we'll have more than a good picture on our hands. We'll have a riot."

LARSON'S the type of man you want in command of your schooner when you're caught in the ice. He don't get flustered and his face don't betray a thing he don't want known. They already believed there was danger of bein' caught and held. He didn't figger there was any percentage in sayin': "The first was a gag to scare you. This is the real thing. Now get a real scare on."

There was a different sound when we turned out the followin' mornin'. The roar and grind of the pack was constant. We could see pressure ridges formin' as the floe alongside buckled under a strain we couldn't see. Floe was meetin' floe somewhere and the weak spots were bucklin'. That afternoon around one o'clock Larson barks out an order.

"Get as much stuff on the ice as possible," he orders. "The schooner may go."

Moe starts to rub his hands gleefully, then changes his mind. "No-Shirt," he says, "ain't this goin' too far?"

I see the time has come to tell the truth, so I take him aside and explain what's happened. And the little son-of-a gun came through. He didn't get scared. He turns kinda pale, though, and says, "What a picture this will make! And what publicity—if we come through. I'll have the radio operator send out the story right now."

"You'd better. The radio transmitter will go down with the schooner if she goes," I warn him.

Moran Gilder puts his cameramen to work getting shots. With a little direction, even the crew fits into the picture. There're shots showin' the men cuttin' toggles into solid ice, then runnin' ropes from the toggles to the schooner. Other shots of all hands hurryin' supplies ashore. Van Lambert, who turns yellow in the picture, put on a real performance. About one percent art and ninety-nine, raw emotion.

The sun goes down. The stars come out and it gets clear and cold.

The roar never lets up, though. It gets louder, then pressure ridges leap up a few rods away. We can hear the slabs of ice

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pushed up only to fall back. Gilder is cold as the ice around him now. He orders the generators on the schooner started. He runs cables to the ice and connects them up to flood lights.

"If she's crushed," he tells the cameramen, "grind away until the water reaches the generators and cuts off the light."

DEEP down in the schooner the timbers begin to creak and groan under the pressure. The ice piles up around her and she shudders from bow to stern. Slowly she commences to lift. "She may not go down," Van Lambert hoarsely yells. "It looks like she'd be pushed up."

Others don't say a word. They know her stout walls will provide shelter against the winter's storms and cold. They know if she *does* go down they'll have to mush afoot to the nearest land, draggin' *umiaks* behind them so they can cross the leads. They know it might take them weeks, even months. They know they might not make it at all.

The pack ice doesn't stay still. It moves in a great circle carrying wrecks deep into the Arctic basin, then returning them years later with frozen men in frozen bunks.

She starts to slip back again, and someone groans. It wasn't Lambert this time. He was too far gone for sound.

Now the ice really gets in its work. It is backed by millions of tons of floe. The schooner is squeezed upward with a roar, then she tilts over on her starboard beam.

Her mastheads make swift arcs against the sky, then come to a slow stop.

Above the roar of the ice I can hear Gilder's voice sayin', "Cut!" The cameramen stop their grindin'. There she is above, not below the ice, warm and snug, generators goin', supplyin' the light for the big lamps floodin' the ghostly scene.

"Fate sure played a trick on us," Bulldozer says, "we try to scare a bunch of actors into thinkin' they're caught in the ice. And our plan backfires. We're *caught* in the ice. No-Shirt, you've got your toughest job ahead of you—keepin' some of this bunch from goin' completely nuts."

Moe Katz comes up and says, "Here we are. I got an idea. We'll finish our shootin', then radio for a plane to come and get us."

Sparks, the schooner's radio operator, comes up at that moment. "Mr. McGee," he says, "you'd better break the news to 'em, the radio may transmit—which I doubt—but that she don't receive."

"Why? What's broken?" I ask.

"I don't think anything's broken," he answers, "I think we're in one of the blind spots."

I'd heard of the *dead* or *blind* spots in the North. For some reason reception and transmission is either a problem, or else it is impossible. Sound waves seem to be smothered in a blanket. I've heard there are places where even a whistle's blast isn't heard a few hundred feet beyond the steamer. And there are stories of ships, unaware of each other's presence, hitting in a fog.

"Keep at it, Sparks," I answer. "Better get our position from Captain Larson, and radio it for luck. It might get through."

IV

. . . Me, oh my, time goes trickling by, and still no word from the Icebound troupe. Sure you aren't overdoing it, Moe? In case you didn't know it, your bankers are getting very, very nervous. When the crash comes, don't say Peter Piper didn't warn you. Come out, come out, wherever you are. Nobody believes you're really hurt . . .

WE SLEPT on the ice that night. The schooner and the ice was both shiftin' and there was no tellin' what might happen. In the mornin' the cook snuck aboard and got a meal, then we went aboard and sat down to a table that was slantin' badly.

Captain Larson and a couple of natives make a long trip over the ice as soon as breakfast is finished. When they get back it's late afternoon and the captain

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says the pressure has eased up a little.

"Couldn't we blast our way out of this?" Van Lambert asks. "It's a terrible mess. suppose you realize we may be here all winter. The radio operator says he can't break through the dead zone."

"We could get through," Larson answered, "if we could blast ice for ten miles. By that time there'll be more ice to blast away. We're frozen in."

"Damn it, McGee," Van Lambert groans, "you're responsible for this. When we get back I'll sue you and Moe for every nickel—"

"Van, please—" Helen begins, white-lipped.

"If we live through this," Moe says, "you'll see the time you'll thank Mr. No-Shirt for gettin' you here, Van. And that goes for some of the others, too. You ain't lived, suffered and sacrificed. That's what gives actors depth." I could tell he was quoting from something. "Helen, she had it tough as a kid, Denny Caldwell, he had it even tougher. He ain't never had a break until I decided he might be used in *Icebound*. You, Van, always had it soft. You're belly-achin' louder'n any of us. Get wise to yourself, my friend."

"You've been crying crocodile tears for realism, Moe," Van answers, "and—well, you're getting it." He scowls at me. "And it'll be a fine day, McGee, when I thank you for anything."

"I'll remind you of that, Van," I tell him, "when it happens."

He gives me a long, searchin' look, then saunters away.

The realization this situation is true, and not something he dreamed up has a soberin' effect on Moe Katz, too. He understands he can't wave a magic wand or send somebody a telegram and get things straightened out. There isn't a yes-man within miles. He has an idea we'll be reported missin', and nobody will pay any attention to it, thinkin' it a press agent story. Then later, when the silence continues, the news story will break.

The bankers may move in and take over Super-Fine, believing without Moe's guidin' hand the business will crash in a hurry. And with the bankers in charge plenty can happen. They may sell the contracts of his biggest stars to rival studios in order to raise money to pay off notes. Or they may put one of their men in charge of production. And, lacking Moe's touch, that man may spend a million or two on pictures that turn sour.

"I ain't blamin' anybody, No-Shirt," he says, "not even myself. The breaks went against us this time and we got trapped. I still figger your idea was a natural. But from now on, your job is to keep things from gettin' out of hand."

LATER I talk over things with Larson. We agree that plenty of hard work is the answer, and it starts right off the bat. He puts all hands to work movin' ice piled up on the port side of the schooner. A week of this puts her back on an even keel.

It's nasty work, with a fog shuttin' in on all sides, and glazin' everything with ice. Men slip and fall. There's no end of cussin' and when that job's done we're a pretty savage lot. Bulldozer is straw boss on all workin' parties, and he gives orders to everybody from Moe Katz on down to the eskimo sailors.

We're in the ice two weeks before the fog clears enough for the skipper to take observations. The whole country is dreary and depressin'. Then all at once the weather changes and it starts snowin'. It ain't safe for a man to leave the schooner. We're cooped up in the cabin, galley and foc'sl'. Some of us visit back and forth, but most of us play cards, read or brood.

I notice Helen Hewitt spends most of her time the first couple of weeks with Van Lambert. That's natural enough. They're supposed to be engaged. But the third week she's with Denny Caldwell a lot. They play cards together and talk. She tells him a few things about her childhood, and pretty soon she's got him talkin' about his boyhood days. I've a hunch these two speak the same language and have plenty in common and are just beginning to

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realize it. I look at Van Lambert and I can see his thin lips take on a permanent sneer, and I notice the hard, bitter look that's in his eyes most of the time. He's seethin' inside—like a pampered brat that a too-indulgent pa has finally slapped—but he's holdin' together better than I figured.

I take Bulldozer aside. "Listen, you," I tell him, "I want you to spark Helen."

"That won't be hard," he answers. "But I get it. I'm to be a live decoy and draw some of Van's hate from Denny to myself. Okay, No-Shirt. They ain't like us, are they? Ain't used to this kind of life. Nerves are plenty tight and the blow-up will come sooner than you think."

"No, Bulldozer you're wrong," I tell him. "The blow-up won't come sooner than *I* think. It'll come sooner than the others think, except Larson. He's been icebound before."

I hung around Sparks a lot, hoping he would either pick up news or be able to get through. There was a chance one of his frequent: "*Polar Night.* Icebound. All well" messages might get through. He followed this with the schooner's position.

When the long snowstorm ended I tried to get some snow sports goin', but didn't have much luck. It *was* cold, as Van Lambert said. But Bulldozer, Helen and Denny joined in. The eskimos were all for it, naturally. They broke out a big hide and tossed each other in it. Denny took a turn and landed upside down a couple of times, but Helen came down three times and shot thirty feet into the air, the last time. Each time she landed on her feet.

Me and Moe didn't go in for it. We're gettin' along and our bones are brittle. If you don't land right you're liable to break anything from your neck to a finger.

This eased the tension some, then Moran Gilder ordered some exterior action showing the snow-shrouded schooner.

THE thing me and Bulldozer was guardin' against happened when we least expected it. That's the way it usually turns out. He had been hangin' 'round Helen a lot and Van Lambert was pretty savage over the whole business. He was hurt at bein' shoved around, angry and in a daze too.

He's playin' cards with one of the cameramen. His name is Markoff, and he's a slim, dark man with a thin, finely formed nose.

Van's luck had been runnin' against him. They were playin' for beans, but just the same Van's the kind who wants to win. Shucks, winnin's his habit.

Suddenly he says, "You dealt that ace from the bottom of the deck, Markoff. I'll just take that pot." His voice was icy.

Markoff gets to his feet. He's deathly white. His fingers are jerkin' and the little muscles around his mouth are knottin' and unknottin'.

"Van," Helen says, "get hold of yourself."

"I never cheated in my life," Markoff manages to say at last. "I . . ."

Then Van's fist flashes, and that thin nose is spread all over Markoff's face. Denny Caldwell leaps the width of the cabin and gets in between them. Markoff's tryin' to collect his senses long enough to open a long-bladed pocketknife he carries. He's forty pounds lighter'n Van Lambert, but he figgers the knife and speed will make up for his lack in weight.

"Jump somebody your size, Van," Denny says. He isn't smilin', which is unusual. And he's dead calm.

"You've been askin' for it a long time, Denny," Van yips out, spinnin'. "And you're goin' to get it."

"Van! Denny!" Helen shouts. "Stop it!"

"Keep out of this, Helen," Van says savagely, "I won't hurt your pet . . . too much."

"Van," Helen answers sharply. "You aren't yourself. You don't know what you're saying."

"Get it out of your systems, boys," I tell 'em. "It's the only way to have any peace on this man's schooner. Outside, where there's plenty of room."

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Before the two can really get started for the ice, all hands are luggin' cameras and lights outside. The generators commence to turn over, the big lights go on and the scene is almost blinding.

They square off and for about ten seconds they remember they're actors and that cameras are on 'em. Even Markoff, with a rag tied around his nose, is grinding away. About the eleventh second, Van Lambert clinches with Denny and the two go to the ice. I see Van's knee whip into Denny's groin, and Markoff snarls, "You rat, fight fair."

Denny's rollin' over on the ice with pain, but he sets his jaw and gets to his feet. One camera gets a close-up of his face. It ain't a pleasant face because it's twisted with pain and flushed with fury. He commences to stalk Van and the latter is spillin' insults out of the corner of his mouth and watchin' for another chance. Van keeps backin' off, knowin' Denny is weak, and that he's leg-weary.

"Stand up and fight, you," Denny snarls. He's almost whimperin' in his eagerness to get at Van. He's limpin' and we can't help but think of a cripple fightin' a strong man. Van is big and his movements is like a cat's.

Van shifts until he can get Denny's legs tangled up in a snowdrift. Then as he's about to follow up this advantage, an eskimo, Antuk, shoves Van back onto the packed snow again. A sailor, who has favored Van from the first, ties into the eskimo, and the first thing I know there's a free-for-all.

Helen Hewitt says, "No-Shirt! Do something! You've got to stop this."

I yell at Bulldozer, who is about to make war on the Lambert sympathizers: "We're neutral."

"The devil we are," he yelps back, "and maybe you'd like to make somethin' of it. You're favorin' Lambert. If you didn't, you'd have banged him over the head with a club before this."

Then I make for Bulldozer. "You idjit," I yell. "Get some sense into your fool head. You ain't goin' to hit me unless you're as ice-dumb as the rest. What's the matter—can't you take it without blowin' up like a city slicker?"

He gives me a sheepish grin. "Okay. So what'll I do?"

"Haul the Caldwell men off'n the backs of the Lambert men," I tell him. "Captain Larson will give us a hand."

AND the skipper, who'd learned fightin' the hard way, wades in. In about two minutes we have everybody except Denny and Van in two herds and are standin' between them. They're at it toe to toe, now, slowly, surely beatin' each other into submission. I see Denny's fist connect with Van's jaw at last, and he goes down. I lean over and yell in his ear, "Quit doggin' it. Get up and fight. Yellow? Or ain't you?"

His upper lip twitches like a cur dog's when it's got enough of a fight and the other dog won't let it quit. He gets up, and his legs are plenty good. "You've cheated Denny," Helen says. "Van was ready to quit."

"That's what I was afraid of," I says. "I don't want him to quit."

"You *are* cruel," she gasps. "Just as bad as the others. I hate you! I hate you all. I wish I'd never seen any of you!"

"Foldin' up too, eh?" I says softly, and so polite it's an insult.

"I'm not," she panted. Then she tears into the fight herself, tryin' to part first one, then the other. Pretty soon Denny sweeps her out of the way with a cuff on the shoulder. Van gives her a final shove and she goes sprawlin' into the snowbank. He's wide open for a punch, but Denny holds his fire, then they go at it again.

A few seconds later Denny is down and Van keeps beatin' him while he's tryin' to get up. Van's breath comes in sobs, and he sets his jaw and measures Denny for each blow. I don't know how Denny ever managed to do it, but he got the weakness out of his knees and stood up.

Then he starts swingin'. Most of his blows was clean misses, but they staggered Van when they connected. Denny caught

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him flush on the jaw at last, and down he went.

Now here's somethin' the crowd thought was funny. The first time Van went down he was ready to quit. I make him get up. He takes a beatin'; and now he goes down really hurt, and it breaks his heart because he *can't* get up.

Somewhere I heard Moran Gilder's voice say, "Cut!"

We look at each other kinda funny, then we realize this was a motion picture, as well as a grudge fight. "There's a lot of this that isn't in the script," Gilder says. "But it's goin' to stay right in. It's priceless. I only hope nothing happens to the film while they're developing it."

V

. . . And here's an open memo to Moe Katz, the producer of the film Icebound, whose troupe has given no word of their whereabouts in weeks. Moe, I'm giving you just one last chance to prove me right, and to admit that the disappearance of your ship Polar Night was just what I said it was—a colossal hoax. Forget about your million dollars' worth of publicity, Moe; no picture in the world is worth the heartbreak and anguish your tactics are causing the friends and relatives, not to mention the countless millions of fans, of those fine young performers who accompanied you.

Mrs. Hewitt, Helen's mother, and Mrs. Denny Caldwell are beside me as I speak. She begs you, Moe, if you are all alive, to forget your silly stunt—to let the anxious world hear just the word that you are alive and safe. We're all waiting, Moe. Be a man. You can't play football with people's hearts and get away with it. . . .

FOR several seconds after the fight is over, Van Lambert lies on the ice without movin'. Helen bends over him and whispers, "Can I do somethin' for you, Van?"

"You can please go away and leave me alone," he says, pushin' her hand away, and starin' sick-like at the blood he's wiped from his torn mouth.

"I'll not get out," she says quietly. Damned if it don't make me sick to think a swell girl like Helen can be in love with a guy like that. But that's the way it goes —a girl can't control her affections . . . much.

She wipes the blood from his face and helps him to his feet. He looks around, his mouth twisted, takin' in every one of us. He looks at Antuk a long time. "You greasy savage," he says, "I'm remembering you. I'd've had him, but you shoved me out of that drift. And you, McGee, I'm remembering you, too. You made me get up and take another beating. Well, you got your scene—and you haven't any idea how much it's going to cost you. I never forget a face, particularly a rat's." Then he staggers aboard and lurches to his cabin.

Denny Caldwell follows. "I'm sorry, Helen, that I gave you that shove," he says, "but—it had to be a finish fight between the two of us. You understand that, don't you? Even Van wanted it that way."

"Yes, of course," the girl answers. "Oh Denny, I'm so unhappy."

"While we've got the lights on, Helen," Gilder says, "I want you to go through a couple of scenes. Your fiancé has had a hand-to-hand fight with a polar bear. He's badly torn. His life hangs in the balance. Eskimos drag him in. Remember, if he dies you're alone in the Arctic until a rescue party can locate you. If he lives, you'll have to drag him to safe ice."

"Yes," she answers, "I know. I'm ready, but what about poor Denny?"

"Poor Denny will be just as comfortable on a sled as he will in a bunk licking his wounds," Denny says cheerfully enough.

I wouldn't accuse Moran Gilder of takin' advantage of Denny's wretched state, but the truth is he squirmed enough as sundry pains stabbed him to make it appear that he had been chawed by a bear.

It gave me a funny feelin' watchin'

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them eskimos draggin' the sled over the ice with a injured man on it. The same feelin' must've reached Helen, too. Prob-ly she felt as I did, that we might be doin' that very thing before the winter was over. If the ship went to pieces and we tried to make it to land, somebody would be sure to fall and break up his bones.

As I watch Helen go through her act, I forget about the cameras and lights. I'm in the Arctic watchin' a girl who thinks her man is a goner. Every few seconds I hear Moe Katz say softly, "Nice goin', darlin'. Nice goin'!"

The first thing I know I've got a lump in my throat and Bulldozer is sayin', "What the blazes, it's only actin'."

We're a pretty tired lot when we fin'ly turn in that night. But hates and all that go with them don't tire. They slumber, and when we wake up in the mornin' and meet at the breakfast table, the silence is so thick you can cut it, and men avoid each other's eyes, like prizefighters do when they pass each other on their way to their corners at the end of a round.

AFTER breakfast I line everybody up, and give 'em a talk. "Sometimes a fight clears the atmosphere," I explain, "and this one should have. Whether it did or not, is up to you. One thing's certain, we're cooped up together, and we're goin' to be for quite a few months to come."

A groan goes through the crowd.

"This is late November," I continue. "We'll have a Thanksgiving dinner. Don't laugh—"

"Don't worry," Van Lambert says through his battered lips, "I couldn't laugh. And Christmas will be very merry. Dear old Christmas. We'll sing carols and have roast pig. And if anybody wants any suggestions as to who to cast for the part of the pig, I'd be happy to make them."

"We'll be merry at Christmas time," Helen said sharply, "or we'll be dead. Things can't go on like this. Why not shake hands all around and start over?"

"Now there's my good little girl scout," Van said. "But when you hate a man, you don't shake his hand unless you're a damned hypocrite. I haven't sunk that low yet, thank God."

"After Christmas," I continue, "then comes January, and later on it'll begin to look as if the sun might come back. After the days have grown longer, the birds will come North. We may get in some hunting to break the monotony. But, it may be July or August before we're out of this."

They groaned again. Captain Larson nods when they look at him. But I know he's thinkin' the schooner may never get out, but instead might become one of the ghost ships the natives, and some of the whites in the Arctic know so well.

"And so," I conclude, "you can see, with a long stretch ahead of us, we've got to get along. Unless you people are abnormal, you'll come out of this better actors. And better people. If you'll forget the other fellow is gettin' on your nerves, and try to turn this test to your advantage you'll cash in plenty. This sounds like a Rover Boy speech, but the cards have to be put on the table. They're on."

There weren't any cheers when I got done. I didn't want any. Most of 'em were thoughtful, and that helped some.

I took one last look around, then went outside to stretch my legs. It was clear and cold, and the stars hung low. But we made it a rule not to walk too far from the schooner even on clear nights. A storm might come up sudden, or a man fall through a crack that driftin' snow had bridged over.

I take my tramp around the schooner. Icicles are hangin' from the riggin' makin' the *Polar Night* look as if she'd been frozen in a hundred years. Hollywood would work a long time to built a set like her. Not that they couldn't, but because a builder's imagination couldn't put in everything Nature puts into such a set.

Bulldozer joins me. "That fat's in the fire," he says. "I'd say your talk was

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about forty percent effective. It missed the ones that needed it most—Van Lambert; Antuk, who don't figger he needs it; and Markoff who is still nursin' his grudge against Van. But who am I to talk? I'd be nursin' one too, if he'd flattened out my nose."

"Where is he now?"

"In the schooner's dark room developin' the pictures we shot last night," Bulldozer answers. "And he's broodin' in there. How about taking knives and guns away from everybody and givin' 'em to Larson?"

"No, that won't work. They're on their honor now and that'll hold 'em in check, or should," I argue. "If they figger we don't trust 'em they'll go the limit."

SEVERAL days pass and things get no better fast. Van Lambert ain't the kind to give ground for anybody. There's plenty of open feelin' against him, but he comes into the cabin when he feels like it, smokes and listens to the conversation.

Then one night I see a change in his eyes.

They've got a hard, searing burn into them. As if maybe his eternal soul was on fire. He smokes so hard it's a wonder his tongue don't sizzle and his nerves are tense. Suddenly he throws the pipe onto the deck and swears. His face flushes up and the cords and veins stand out.

"He's goin' nuts," Bulldozer whispers. "He can't take it."

"Easy . . . Van," Denny warns. "You've got what it takes if you just use it. Let's go for a hunt tomorrow. Or . . . right now. We can find a seal or something. The moon's bright."

"I don't need your help," Van answers savagely. "I'll pull through this. But must a man look at the same faces day after day, week after week? Month after month! And for God's sake, McGee, stop playing those endless, crazy games with that knife." He starts to laugh, soft, then shriller and higher.

"Better lock him up," Captain Larson whispers.

"No," Denny argues, "that *would* push him over the borderline. He'd be a mental case for fair."

Markoff, hearin' that crazy laughin' comes into the room. Then Antuk shows up. Both of 'em recognize Van's voice and they want to know what's goin' on. There's hate in their eyes.

"Clear out, Markoff. And you, too, Antuk," Denny orders. "Give him a chance."

"Van," Helen says, "let's go for a walk."

"Stay here," Denny orders in a whisper. Van hears it. "Don't trust me, eh?" Like a crazy man he grabs my knife and hurls it at Denny. Denny ducks and the blade sticks in the wall. I can see the handle tremble from the impact.

A HARPOON whistles through an open door and its ivory head just misses Van's throat. A second follows just as Denny rushed in to grapple with Van. Bulldozer and me are convergin' and it's a wonder the second harpoon didn't get one of us. It goes clean through Denny's shirtsleeve and splinters the cabin woodwork.

Van, seeing he's cornered, hits the door leadin' to the deck and nearly knocks it off'n its hinges. It's snowin' outside—one of those sudden flurries that come without warnin'—and flakes swirl into the room.

"Get him!" Helen cries. "Stop him, please! He's out of his head."

"Wait a minute," Larson warns. "Lambert's wearin' a parka and is dressed warm. Put on your parkas and mitts before you go out there. I don't want frostbite cases on my hands."

It gives Van a headstart. Ordinarily we'd have done nothin', knowin' he'd have to come back for grub and by that time in the interests of give and take, everybody would've cooled off. But two or three of us figger he's out of his head. The strain of the past weeks has snapped his self-control.

"Better let me and Bulldozer go," I

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say. "You, Denny, and some of the others are too hot under the collar."

"Clean out the ship's brig," Denny snaps. "He's goin' into it. I'll come back when I find him."

While this talkin' is goin' on, all of us are pullin' on parkas.

Denny's the first one out. I'm next, but I figger maybe Markoff and a couple of the eskimos are ahead of him. They'd gone out another door. There're tracks on deck and the gangway leadin' from the deck to the ice. But the driftin' snow covers 'em up a few yards from the schooner.

The skipper sounds the air whistle at frequent intervals so we can find our way back to safety. Me and Bulldozer make a run straight away, then circle back in opposite directions, the idea bein' to pick up Van's trail. We can maintain a fair position by listening to the whistle. We're gone an hour and when we return, we find the others linin' the rail.

"They didn't find him," Helen says. "They're alone."

It gives me an uneasy feelin'. She thinks because I've spent a lifetime in the North, I can do anything. She was dead sure I'd go into the storm and locate Van. The others are the same way. "No-Shirt knows the answers," one of the cameramen said at least once a day. "Let him handle it."

"No trace," I tell 'em. Not even a footprint. "There's only one thing to do —keep the whistle goin'. It's certain we can't find him."

A couple of eskimos are put to work signalin'. With that icy blast howlin' down from the North Pole, and the snow drivin' so hard it almost cut the skin, the sudden ringin' of the ship's bell and the blast of the whistle, made the night eerie.

It's a lesson in give and take, and a costly one. "Folks," Moran Gilder says, "Poor Van is out there somewhere. Sure, it's his fault. But it's your fault and mine, too. We've got to tighten up on our blasted tempers, and not feel that everybody is out to take advantage of us. Van always had it easy, and his temperament wasn't up to this. Sure, he was spoiled, selfish and a lot of other things. But our responsibility to him was increased just that much more."

No one answered. There was no answer to make. "Let's project the rushes," Moe Katz says. "That'll break in on things."

"We'll show everything but the fight," I tell Moe in a low voice. "That fight was too personal, and it's liable to start several more blazes."

"Okay, No-Shirt," Moe answers. "I guess you're right. I'd like to see it though."

THE room is darkened and the projector connected up. Most of the stuff is pretty terrible. The photography is swell, and the icebound schooner fighting to get clear, then being caught, is fine. But the acting is lousy. Then we come to the scene where Helen meets the eskimoes bringin' in the wounded hero.

"Powerful!" Gilder exclaims. "You've never been finer, Helen."

"I felt that scene," the girl answers.

"It's too bad the rest of us can't grasp this chance," Gilder says. "My directing is poor. I'm not saying it won't be a good picture, but I am saying it won't be a great picture as it stands. The thing we're after still eludes us. And we've got to have a great picture to put Super-Fine up on top again." He turns to Moe Katz. "What'll we do with this?"

"Burn it up," Moe answers. "I still think McGee was right. A great picture will come out of this company . . . yet."

In the stillness that follows all we can hear is the wind howlin' a dirge through the riggin'. Then there's another sound, a scratchin' at the door and a pawin' at the knob. It turns as Bulldozer starts for the door.

The door opens and Van Lambert staggers in. He falters a couple of steps, then falls into Bulldozer's arms.

"Exhausted," Denny says. "But hold on . . . what's this?"

The snow on his parka is stained crim-

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son. "Somebody stabbed me," Van gasps. "I was goin' down the gangplank and . . . they let me have it. Fell . . . underneath."

We got the parka off and found a nasty wound extending downward from the neck. It ran parallel to the spine. In fact it just missed the vertebra in a couple of spots. Even as we're examinin' the wound, men are accusin' men, with their eyes. I'm thinkin' that an eskimo, probably Antuk; Denny Caldwell; or Markoff could've done it. They were the first out, and could've overtaken Van from behind and let him have it as he was goin' down the gangway.

Van has bled badly and he's pretty weak. He looks around and whispers, "I'll get the man who did this if it takes the rest of my life. It's Antuk, Markoff or Caldwell. One of the three is a murderer, and I've got a hunch I know which one it is."

When the wound is dressed and Van is in bed, Moe Katz takes me aside. "What do you think, No-Shirt?" he asks.

"Somebody got in a little effective knife work," I answer. "He's lucky to be alive. There was plenty of power back of that stab. Plenty. And it's something that can't be hushed up. We've got to find the guilty man, partly because we want to know who he is, but mostly because we want to clear the others of suspicion."

"It couldn't be Denny Caldwell," Moe says. "He's too easy-goin' to knife a man."

"Denny's changed. His easy-goin' manner made him a poor actor and that was one of your complaints. He fitted into this life better than most, but it's changed him. I ain't sayin' he done it, you understand. But the only men who could have done it are Antuk, Markoff and Denny. I'm sure they were the first to follow Van. Me and Bulldozer was next."

"You couldn't have done it," Moe says, "because the rest of us were right behind you." He sighs. "I expected flare-ups and fights, but I never thought we'd go through attempted murder."

"Van's been pretty nasty to everybody, includin' Helen," I remind him. "I'll do what I can to clear this up. In the meantime we're goin' to keep close watch on Van. The killer may come back to finish the job."

VI

. . . And now, ladies and gentlemen, let's turn for a moment to the more serious side of picture-making. I should be the last one to take any pleasure out of making this announcement—and I am. For what started out as a publicity hoax has turned to deepest tragedy.

Yes, you're right, my friends. There can no longer be any doubt that the Ice-bound company which sailed north over a month ago, has met with a fate that has turned the publicity department's wildest dreams into bitter actuality.

It will be a sad Christmas for their friends and families this year, for the Polar Night is—I think I may say definitely—lost with all hands. I have it on the best authority that the bankers are taking over Super-Fine Productions and that . . .

SPARKS calls me into the radio shack a couple of days after Van was wounded. "Mr. McGee," he says, "last night I was tryin' to pick up a radio broadcast. I worked on both short and long wave lengths. It must've been a good night because I caught a faint voice. There was plenty of interference, and the voice was mixed up with a noise that sounded like a freight train crossin' a bridge."

"What did you hear?"

"Parts of a radio movin' picture commentator's nightly broadcast," he answers. "*Polar Night* is lost with all hands. I have it on the best authority bankers are taking over Super-Fine and that the contracts of several top flight stars are for sale.' "

"Don't let Moe Katz hear that," I answer, "or anybody else. What else have you to report?"

"Nothing, except I jammed the air, at various wave lengths, with these words,

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'Polar Night icebound. All hands well.' "

"Let's hope it was a good night for transmission and somebody picked it up," I tell him. "The trouble is, most people are liable to think it a false report."

I went to Moran Gilder that night. Somebody had to know what was going on outside. He looked pretty dejected for several seconds. "So they're breaking up the organization and selling the stars down the river, eh?" He shakes his head. "That means the banks are liquidating. Queer, isn't it, we'd come up here to make a great picture and the breaks would go against us. No-Shirt, your idea was sound enough on the face of it, but it simply didn't work out. The thing we're after still escapes us." He throws up his hands in disgust. "Then on top of everything else, Van Lambert is knifed. We can't seem to get them to pull together."

"I came to you for a big reason," I tell him. "We can't let everybody know they're breakin' up Super-Fine. But if you know, it seems to me you'll put a little more into your work—that'll make you play over your head as they say of an inspired ball team. And you'll carry the others along by your momentum. And don't forget what Helen Hewitt did in her scene with Denny."

"I'll never forget it," he says. "The high spot of the picture."

"Okay. Then tell everybody we start shootin' tomorrow," I suggest. "Shove work at 'em until Christmas."

"I suppose there's nothing else to be done," he answers. "But the least said about Christmas the better. It's the season of good will toward men and there isn't an ounce of that on the *Polar Night* except what you dish out—which same is appreciated."

"Moe Katz has given every man in the *Polar Night* company a break," I say bluntly, "and the least everyone can do is to give him their best, while he's in a jam."

"You're right, No-Shirt," he answers. "We can't let the news about Super-Fine get out. That's just between us. But I can bear down on myself a little. We start shootin' again the first thing in the morning. And let's pray that something else doesn't touch off another explosion."

THEY start bright and early, and Gilder keeps 'em at it all day. He studies the script a lot, makes changes here and there to conform to changin' conditions, and he postpones the scenes that Van Lambert appears in.

I'm hopeful things will iron themselves out. But no dice. They're troupers. They give their best when workin', and I'd say most of the cast was inspired, but as soon as they knock off work, all the old hates crop to the surface. Again everybody aboard ship, except me and Bulldozer and the schooner's officers, are on one side or the other.

Some of 'em commence to show wear and tear about the middle of December. The mystery of Van Lambert's stabbin' ain't cleared up yet, and with everybody suspectin' nearly everybody else the nerve strain is terrible. I find myself lookin' southward for signs of the returnin' sun, when I know darned well the sun won't start to swing north again until around Christmas time.

But that's the way you get—impatient for time to fly, and time seems to move slower than ever. Captain Larson sends for me about the twentieth.

"Is there any way we can sneak by Christmas?" he asks. "To us, it should be a day to knock off work, stuff ourselves, and enjoy life in general. But these picture people will realize more than ever they're prisoners."

"I've been givin' Christmas a lot of thought," I answer, "and I'm makin' some plans. But, Cap'n, it's sure in the laps of the gods this time."

"Do you know my idea of a real Christmas present?" he asks.

"No," I answer, "what is it?"

"Enough transport planes to take the *Icebound* company off my ship," he answers. "That'd be the best Christmas I've ever had."

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Me and Helen Hewitt go into a huddle that night. I raid the ship's stores, poke around in queer places, and sneak things into her cabin. I spend so much time there Denny Caldwell, Bulldozer and Van Lambert are jealous.

The mornin' of the twenty-third I'm feelin' lower'n a snake's belly. Some fool got to talkin' about Christmas and that starts all hands to thinkin'. Pretty soon they're yellin' insults at each other, and the first thing I know I'm in a rumpus with both Denny Caldwell and Van Lambert.

If good-natured Denny is off his feed, you can figger the state of mind of the others. I almost swing on him. And I'd have swung on Lambert if he'd been a well man. An eskimo who likes him wants to work me over with a knife, but Bulldozer knocks him sprawlin'. I got outside to get a breath of fresh air and to think. It's clear enough, and the Northern Lights are bright—playin' hob with any weak radio waves that might come to Sparks' sets. I think I'll take a walk, so catch hold of the riggin' to swing down to the gangway.

I don't hear anybody sneakin' up on me. But the first thing I know somethin' slices into my right arm. "Knife searchin' for my ribs and the arm got in the way," I think.

Then things go black. . . .

VII

. . . Friends, here's the grandest Christmas surprise imaginable. The impossible has happened, and the wildest hopes of uncounted movie fans have been realized. But I won't take up any more of your time by talking. It is my great pleasure—and I do mean my very great pleasure—to take you now across thousands of miles of snow and ice as we broadcast direct to . . .

WHEN I get my senses back, Bulldozer is ragin' around, claimin' he'll kill the man who tried to knife me. Everybody's under suspicion. "It was a glancin' blow," he says, "just ripped the hide a little. And listen, an eskimo done it, or else a white man with an eskimo harpoon. It wasn't a steel-bladed knife-wound."

"I ain't got no idea who done it," I tell him. "Can't see, though, why such a wound would give me a headache."

"Say," he says, "you've got a knob on your head. Musta struck when you went down from the knife wound!"

"How could a knife wound knock a man unconscious?" I ask.

"Now you're makin' it a worse mystery than ever," he grumbles. "But you're right." He scowls. "Tell me what you can remember."

"Just grabbed hold of the riggin' and swung down," I tell him, "and then I got it. But don't worry, I ain't goin' to be no bed case."

I didn't get much sleep that night, between my flesh wound hurtin' and bein' worried over things generally. I got up late the mornin' of the twenty-fourth because I've a hunch I'm goin' to be late gettin' to bed. The hunch is right. Shortly before turnin' in I says, "Gents, we're goin' to have a Christmas celebration tomorrow. I want each one of you to dig up a present of some kind. Put your name on the package so you won't get the same package back. I'm goin' to be Santa Claus and every one aboard is goin' to get a present."

I'll say this much for 'em. They knew I was tryin' to help things along and they kept their sneers to theirselves, but I could see 'em lurkin' under the surface.

Larson, who was in on my plans, watched their faces as I talked. When he got me alone, he says, "No-Shirt I think you're licked at the start.

I went to bed, but when everybody else had turned in, I got up again. Wound or not, there was a job to be done. Me, Bulldozer and Helen worked until after midnight, then we turned in again. My wound was stiff the next mornin'. I guess I'd strained the muscles around it too much while gettin' ready for Christmas. "You

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gotta be Santa Claus," I told Bulldozer. Then I went out and yelled, "All hands on deck."

THEY came out, lookin' sour, but afraid they might miss somethin'. There was a Christmas tree stuck in one corner of the room. It had lights, decorations and everything else. No, we didn't go out onto the ice and chop it down. I borrowed a trick from the eskimos. After they'd learned about Christmas they made Christmas trees out of sticks and green paper.

Here and there I could see that pathetic-lookin' tree was gettin' under their hides. Bulldozer comes out, rigged in a Santa Claus outfit and does some wise-crackin' then he passes out the presents. I see Denny Caldwell slip Helen one on the side, and Van Lambert who is up and around again, gives her a second one.

The excitement dies down and we get into the old rut. Maybe we ain't in quite as deep, but we're there. We eat breakfast, then I make an announcement that curls their hair. "At six o'clock tonight, folks, I'll tell who stabbed Van Lambert and who stabbed me."

You could've heard a pin drop at that. "Did the same man do it?" Moran Gilder asks nervously.

"No," I answer, "two different men. Now go ahead and have a good time."

Time drags. The cook fixes up a Christmas dinner, with Helen lendin' a hand. I notice she's different in an apron. She looks like some cuss' pretty wife instead of one of the country's leadin' stars.

I can't eat much. I'm too worried over whether things are goin' to turn out right or not.

The meal's over, then we pass the cigars. When they're smoked I give Sparks a look. He disappears and noises come over the amplifier in the cabin. He's put several mikes around the cabin and I call in one of the sailors. He's got an accordion and I suggest he play a Christmas carol.

"I'd like to have you all join in," I tell the others.

It's *Silent Night.*

Me and Helen carry most of the tune. Bulldozer helps when he can, but it ain't very successful. Then Sparks comes in with a terse: "Quiet everybody!"

SUDDENLY the room is filled with the voice of a man who is thousands of miles to the South—where they have telephones and provisions can be had at the corner grocery; where you can travel by automobile or plane, if you're in a hurry—where you ain't icebound. It's some Hollywood babbler by the name of Peter Piper.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the voice says, "we are dedicating this carol to the members of the *Icebound* company, who are really icebound—caught in the ice pack and being carried slowly into the Arctic basin."

Then a chorus of fine voices sings *Silent Night.*

By golly, you can almost feel a change in the cabin. Men begin to relax. Van Lambert leans forward and listens. Denny Caldwell tilts back in his chair and looks at the ceilin'. Each man to his own picture; each to his own thoughts. Helen Hewitt, bein' a woman, wipes her eyes.

The song ends, then the voice says, "Perhaps the *Icebound* company will sing *us* a carol? We make no promises. Come in, *Polar Night!* Schooner *Polar Night* come in."

I start it off, and the others come in.

There ain't no holdin' back this time. And that part where it goes, *All is calm, all is bright.* Remember? Well, they do something special on that.

When we're through we listen, and the voice says, "Reception is perfect. We thank Helen Hewitt, Denny Caldwell, Van Lambert and Moe Katz. Yes, and the others. And we're looking forward to your return. Weather permitting, planes will bring you out soon. Your position is known. Merry Christmas."

"Nobody ever got a better present than that," Van Lambert says. "We're getting out of this blasted place. And . . . I'll take that back. I said it would be a fine

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day when I thanked No-Shirt for getting me into this. It's a hell of a fine day . . . with the storm howling down from the North again, and . . . but I thank you, No-Shirt."

"It's a fine day," I answer.

"But why haven't we had radio reception before?" Moe Katz asks.

"We've been in a blind spot," I answer, "but the schooner's driftin' with the pack. We gradually got out of it. A couple of days ago Sparks got a message through, and an answer. We decided to make communication a part of the Christmas celebration. And that ain't all. Markoff has made a partial picture out of the last work we've done, and some of the best of the earlier work. He's goin' to project it."

We watch *Icebound* projected on a small screen. "That's it!" Moe shouts. "That's what we've been gropin' for. That's actin'." He don't need to say a word.

Van Lambert, Denny Caldwell, Markoff and Helen Hewitt know when they're clickin' and when they ain't. With Van almost hisself again, and ready to act, it won't take long to complete the picture.

Me and Moran Gilder don't figger it is necessary to tell Moe the banks started sellin' him out. We know the press agent has made the most of us gettin' froze in and bein' given up for lost. We know the crowds will come out of curiosity and they'll go 'way and tell others they've seen a four-star picture. We know Super-Fine is out of the red.

WHEN the lights switch on, I look at Helen and Van and Denny; and then suddenly, Helen catches my eye, blushes bright red and all but gallops up on deck. In a minute or so, and about as inconspicuous as red flannel drawers on a line, Denny follows her.

O' course it's nothin' but coincidence that it isn't very long after that that I find myself craving a stroll in the fresh air.

"But, Helen, I'm crazy about you," I can only just hear Denny sayin' without movin' closer. Which I do. "Doesn't that make any difference?"

"Of course it does, Denny. You're sweet and I'm very fond of you. I thought for a while that I was even in love with you. But it wasn't true, Denny. I can see that now." She gives his hand a squeeze.

"It's Van," Denny says, his voice flat, and dark, if a voice can be black or white.

"That's right. It's Van. I—I guess it always has been. Oh, for a while, he seemed to be going all to pieces and you were fine and strong. I think any girl might have respected and loved you more then, Denny. But all these weeks, I've been watching you both. You've been fighting not to give way—and Van . . . Well, Van *had* given way and he was fighting to get back, and that's, oh, ever so much harder.

"He thought I didn't care for him any more, that I was in love with you. But that didn't stop him. He went on fighting anyhow. He wasn't showing off any more, Denny. There wasn't any gallery, but it didn't stop him. So I knew that whatever it was I always hoped was in him, really was there. And that I was right to love him."

"I see," Denny said, almost curtly.

"Poor Denny," Helen said, in a voice that sounded gentle and kind and a little amused too. "You'll grow up some day. And Denny, there's one thing you must know. If I had loved you, the way I love Van this minute, I'd have gone to the ends of the earth for you. Nothing would have mattered."

"What could have mattered?" he asks.

"You're married, Denny. That would have mattered."

"You knew I was—"

"Yes, Denny. She was an extra girl on one of my pictures. She thought you were the most wonderful thing on earth."

"She's just a kid, Helen. I'd have made it right for her. If you'd said yes, I would have told you. I would have asked her to let me go. I wasn't trying to put anything over."

"I know that, Denny. That's why I

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didn't say anything. But, Denny, when I got home, I'd buy her the finest mink coat in Hollywood, and I'd tell her that I loved her. She talked about you to me one day. There were two things she wanted. That mink coat. And for you to tell her you loved her. She said you never had—you were so shy, or something."

Denny turned away. "I guess I'm kind of a heel, Helen. I guess maybe it's lucky you didn't really fall for me."

"Make it lucky for her that she did, Denny."

His face brightened then. "I will. I sure will. I'll go get Sparks to cable her Merry Christmas from me with love. . . ."

And like the big kid he was, he larruped off toward the radio room.

Helen looked up to where I was standing. "I know that's not the way you wanted it, No-Shirt," she said. "But then you've been seeing so many movies lately. And tell Van I want him, will you? Yes, that will do nicely. Tell Van I want him with all my heart. . . ."

"SAY, No-Shirt," Moe Katz says, "you were goin' to tell us who stabbed Van and you." This was later, when Helen had come back with Van, who looked as if he'd been hit over the head with a rainbow.

"I've forgiven, and I'm forgetting," Van cuts in. "And I hope others will forgive and forget too. I don't even want to know who knifed me."

"Maybe you don't," I says, "but you're goin' to know. You knifed yourself."

"Me? You're crazy. And I suppose *you* stabbed yourself."

"Yep, you're right," I answered. "Everybody outside on deck and I'll show you how it happened."

We go outside and I say, "Tell me how you left the schooner that time, Van."

"Sure," he answers. "I grabbed the riggin' and swung myself down from the rail to the plank."

"And when you grabbed the riggin'," I answer, "you shook it. And this is what happened." I shake the riggin' and jump back. Several big icicles that had formed on the riggin' dropped. They came, points downward, shaped like the ivory heads of native spears. And some of the big ones had plenty of weight behind them.

Van stares for several seconds, then grins. "Good lord," he groans, "it's a wonder somebody wasn't killed."

"It's a wonder most of us weren't killed—by each other," I answer. "Let's go inside, tune in on some Christmas music and sing."

Van Lambert leads the way. It's a pretty fine Christmas in any man's language if you ask me, but I'm wonderin' how long it will be before they compare notes and realize I'd told each one of them—in confidence—that the bankers was sellin' out Super-Fine and it was up to each one individually to turn in a performance that would bring Super-Fine back again.

Happy Relief From Painful Backache

Caused by Tired Kidneys

Many of those gnawing, nagging, painful backaches people blame on colds or strains are often caused by tired kidneys — and may be relieved when treated in the right way.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking excess acids and poisonous waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging backaches, rheumatic pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from the blood. Get Doan's Pills. (ADV.)

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Brick wavered in the saddle, nearly unconscious from pain

Rawhide Road

By BENNETT FOSTER

Start now this fine novel of the roaring West

YOUNG Thad Breathea is headed for Redondo to find the grandfather he has never seen and to deliver to him certain letters from Thad's dead father. But aboard the train young Breathea gets mixed up in a quarrel precipitated by the crooked gambler, Ten High Croates; and when Thad alights at Las Flores, he discovers that the envelopes containing his money and the letters are missing.

Small, taciturn Dale Krespin, the son of old Jake Breathea's second wife, meets Thad at the station and informs him that his grandfather died a year before. The ranch has been left to Krespin; but there is a small legacy for Thad. Out at the Lazy S, young Breathea is introduced to the foreman, Prince, a smooth, dangerous man; and Thad notices something curiously furtive in Dale Krespin's behavior.

THE next day Thad rides into Las Flores with Krespin to collect his legacy. Waiting in the square, Thad agrees to hold some horses for a stranger, who disappears. Then, a few moments later, guns explode suddenly; three men, rushing from the bank, seize the horses from Thad and ride furiously away. Thad is captured at once as an accomplice in the bank holdup, and he insists to the crowd that he is innocent, a friend of Dale Krespin's. But Krespin steps forward and denies ever having seen the boy before. That night Thad spends in the Las Flores jail.

This story began in last week's Argosy

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Meanwhile, Ten High Croates has arrived in Las Flores, with two envelopes he has picked up on the train. In one he finds money, in the other a letter to old Jake Breathea, begging him to look out for his grandson, Thad. When Ten High learns about Thad's arrest and Dale Krespin's amazing lie, he understands at once that Krespin is trying to get rid of young Breathea in order to keep the ranch. So Ten High makes plans for blackmail with Lulu, the proprietress of a honkytonk.

THAD BREATHEA does not stay in jail long. One night he is broken out by red-haired Brick Mahoney, leader of the bank robbers. With Brick and his partners Curly and Silk, Thad rides to a hideout in the hills. A man was killed in the bank holdup, he learns. Soon Brick is involved in a bitter argument with Curly and Silk over Thad. Because Mahoney insists on sticking by the kid, the two other outlaws strike out on their own.

After a terrific ride Thad, feverish and exhausted, and Brick arrive at a lonely house. The next morning the kid awakes, weak and still aching with fever, to find Brick talking with a man named Kettleman. Kettleman insists that Mahoney and Breathea get going at once; Brick refuses; and the next instant their guns are out. From his bunk Thad sees Brick Mahoney, wounded in the arm, standing over the body of Kettleman. . . .

CHAPTER VII

GOODBYE, HORSETHIEF

BRANCH LONG scrambled out from beneath the table. He walked to Kettleman's body, half turned it with his foot, and then let it slump back. He gave Brick a long, slow look.

"He's dead," Long said.

"I didn't think he was playin' 'possum," Brick answered. "What about it, Branch? Where do you stand? What do you aim to do?"

Long shrugged. "Nothin'," he answered. "But there's this thing sure: yo're goin' to have to move now, Brick."

"I'd like to know why." Brick's eyes were very bright and dangerous and his left arm swung limply as he stepped toward Long. "Kettleman got killed because he said I had to move, Branch."

Again Long shrugged. "You know as well as I do that Kettleman's got friends," he said. "There's been boys droppin' in every day or two. Kettleman was out with some of his outfit last night."

"So you didn't tell me he was here." Still there was danger in Brick's eyes.

"You didn't ask," Long replied. "You wouldn't of gone on anyhow."

"No," Brick agreed, "I wouldn't. But it might of saved some trouble if I'd known he was at yore place."

Long did not answer that. "He hit you," he said.

"In the arm," Brick agreed. "I got to get it fixed." For the first time he seemed to see Thad sitting naked on the bunk. "Git on yore clothes, kid," he ordered. "You look like a jaybird sittin' there."

"Let's see the arm," Long commanded.

Thad dressed while Brick's arm was bared. Kettleman's bullet had cut through the bicep. The wound bled profusely. Long washed it out, Brick sitting beside the table and resting his arm on its top. When Long brought a bottle of turpentine and applied it, Brick winced.

"I think the bone's nicked," Long said, and poured on more turpentine.

"Kettleman an' me had been on the outs for a long time," Brick said musingly. "Him an' me had trouble down in Texas. We was on different sides of a grass fight an' we got beat an' I had to run. Every time I seen him he rubbed that in. He bullied his way around an' got himself a reputation. Now he's got himself killed."

The turpentine bit deep.

"Hold yore arm still," Long said grimly. "Kettleman had friends, you know. They'll be after you now. I can't figger it. Kettleman was supposed to be fast. He ought to of downed you."

"But I downed him!" Brick snapped. "Don't pull that bandage so damned tight, Branch."

"Mebbe you'd ruther do it," Long said. "You don't need to pull off the arm."

Long finished his bandaging. "That'll do," he stated. "Now what, Brick?"

"I want a clean shirt," Brick ordered.

Without a word Long got up and walked to a dilapidated bureau. He rummaged

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in a drawer and pulled out a shirt. "One of Kettleman's," he commented.

"He won't need it," Brick said casually.

LONG had to button the shirt for Brick. When it was on and Brick had stuffed the tails down into his trousers, Long made a sling for the injured arm and stepped back.

"Now what?" he asked.

Brick looked at Thad. "Can you travel, kid?" he asked. "We've got to put miles behind us."

"I can go," Thad said.

"Then we'll go, Branch," Brick announced. "But we ain't runnin'. Nobody's drivin' us out, get that?"

"Sure," Branch Long agreed placatingly. "Sure, Brick."

"Be damned sure," Brick said.

"What about Kettleman?" Long waved a hand toward the body.

"He's in your place," Brick answered. "You'll have to 'tend to him."

Branch Long's sallow face settled into a scowl. "I suppose so," he agreed. "You know, Brick, I'm goin' to have to explain all this. I ain't goin' to take the blame for it. I'll have to tell Kettleman's boys."

"You can tell the whole damned world," Brick snapped.

"Kettleman wasn't wanted around here," Long continued. "The law wasn't after him."

"That's because they didn't know what he was doing," Brick said. "I done the community a favor if they just knew it."

"Mebbe." Long's voice was dubious. "It'll be murder, just the same."

"I ain't goin' to stay to find out what they call it." Brick laughed. "We need some grub, Branch. We need a little outfit, an' my pardner needs a slicker. An' he needs another horse. That one he's got was stole."

Long said nothing.

"Well?" Brick snarled.

"Oh sure, Brick," Long agreed. "Sure. I'll fix you up."

"An' we'll watch you while you do it," Brick announced. "Branch, I don't trust you as far as I can spit. I've paid you plenty. I was told that you were all right. I stopped with you once before an' I had to leave in a hurry. I know what you'll do, Branch. The only thing I got to say is, don't be in a hurry to do it!"

His voice held menace.

"You know I wouldn't split off on you, Brick." Long appeared to be injured. "You know how I stand with you fellows."

"I know that Kettleman was holdin' down your place an' you didn't tell me," Brick told him. "Let's get that grub an' the horses, an' start. I'm right with you, Branch."

Long did not speak again. He moved around the cabin, collecting those things Brick had demanded. Salt pork, some flour, baking powder, coffee, salt, these went into a gunnysack. The smoky skillet, a pot and a five-pound lard bucket, together with two tin cups, went into another gunnysack. From several slickers that hung behind the door, Long selected one and tossed it to Thad, who caught it.

"That all you want?" he asked.

"Two blankets," Brick said.

Long got two blankets from the bunk. "What else?" he demanded.

"Horses," said Brick. "Come on, kid."

Thad helped Brick put on his slicker. The injured arm in its sling hampered Brick. It was evident that the arm pained him. Thad put on the slicker that Long had given him, and the three men went out of the cabin. It seemed impossible to Thad that they could be so calloused, and yet, save for that first brief inspection that Long had made, neither man paid any attention to the body in the room. Thad looked back as he came to the door. Kettleman lay there, still on his face, sprawled on the floor.

THERE were horses in the corral. From these Brick selected two, asking Long whether or not they had been ridden, and examining them carefully. Thad saddled both animals. All the while the rain dripped down from the lead-colored sky. When the horses were saddled, rolls were made of

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the blankets and the provisions and cooking utensils, and tied behind the cantles.

"How much do I owe you, Branch?" Brick asked.

"Five hundred dollars," Long answered steadily.

Brick Mahoney laughed. "You'd ruther have me owe it to you than beat you out of it, wouldn't you?" he asked. "Git on yore pony, kid. Show Branch how they fork a horse in Wyoming. An' after you've got on, watch him!"

Thad had been astounded at the sum Long named. He was more surprised at Brick's words. Long said, "I'll remember this, Brick. Don't think I won't."

"When yo're rememberin', don't forget to think about Kettleman," Brick answered, his voice as deliberately warning as Long's had been. "You set, kid?" Brick was at his horse's head. "Don't forget to watch him."

Thad looked at Long. Long stood still there in the corral, the rain dripping from the brim of his hat and running down the skirts of his slicker.

He did not look pleased.

"If he moves his hands you know what to do, kid," Brick said. "Whoa! you damned jughead. Whoa!"

Thad continued to watch Branch Long. Long was still standing motionless.

"All right, kid," Brick announced. "Start out. I'm watchin' you now, Branch. I owe you five hundred dollars. I'll pay you . . . some day."

They were outside the corral now. Brick had opened the gate before he mounted. The horses in the pen followed the two mounted men out. Long moved to intercept the horses and Brick called: "Let 'em go, Branch!" Long stopped. Thad's horse splashed across a puddle, heading down the canyon; Thad knew that Brick was behind him for he could hear his companion's horse splashing.

When they were two hundred yards from the corral, Thad looked back. Branch Long was running back and forth, trying to pen a horse that did not want to go into the corral. Long's slicker flapped and hampered him and, as Thad looked, the man stopped and jerked off the slicker.

"We stopped him awhile," Brick said with satisfaction. "He's got to catch a horse before he can ride."

"What will he do?" Thad asked.

Brick's horse came abreast of Thad. "He'll catch a horse," Brick answered, "an' then he'll ride an' get some of Kettleman's friends an' they'll hold a pow-wow. Then they'll get word to Charlie Farrell and he'll come out an' they'll talk some more. Then they'll give us a chase."

"Do you think that—?" Thad began.

"Kettleman!" Brick interrupted. "That skunk! I knew I'd have to settle with Kettleman some day. Him an' me been at outs ever since I was a kid. He thought he had it on me."

"What was he doing?" Thad asked curiously.

"Stealing horses. Mebbe rustlin' some cattle," Brick answered. "He was the he-coon in this neck of the woods, or thought he was. He had a reputation as a gunman. He was supposed to be bad. I guess I softened him up some! Mebbe when they get to talkin' about gunhands they'll mention Brick Mahoney now. You're damned right they will!"

Looking with disbelief at Brick, Thad could see his companion's excitement. The exhilaration, the drunkenness still clung to Brick. His eyes sparkled and his cheeks were flushed. Thad felt suddenly sick.

"And what about us, Brick?" Thad asked. "What will we do?"

"Make a lot of tracks," Brick answered. "It ain't just Charlie Farrel an' the law followin' us now, kid. Kettleman's boys are goin' to be pretty sore too. Likely they'll look for us awhile."

"We could have got out," Thad said. "I wasn't sick. I could have traveled."

"An' let Kettleman say that he'd run me off?" Brick demanded. "Not by a damned sight! We'll work south, kid. I got friends around Franklin. We'll get down into that country. An' then we'll show 'em all!"

Thad wondered about that.

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CHAPTER VIII

WELCOME IN MEXICAN

THEY rode on steadily, working out of the hills. They stayed with the canyon and it widened as they rode, the pines on its slopes giving way to cedar. Presently they were out of the cedar and on the plains. The rain hung like a gray curtain which the wind flicked and whipped. At the mouth of the canyon Thad drew rein. Brick's horse went on a few steps and then stopped, and Brick looked back.

"What's the matter, kid?" he asked. "See somethin'?"

"No," Thad answered and then, deliberately, "I'm not going with you, Brick."

Brick brought his horse back. "You ain't goin' with me?" he asked, spacing the words.

"No." Thad shook his head. "I'm not, Brick."

"Why not?" Brick's voice was sharp.

Thad jerked his head toward the canyon. "I can't," he said. "I—"

"You're goin' to split with me, huh?" Brick's eyes were narrow and his lips were thin. "You think you'll just run out on me?"

"That isn't it," Thad answered hastily. "I know what you've done for me, Brick. I know that you got me out of jail and I know that you stuck with me last night. I know that you'd be with Silk and Curly now if it wasn't for me. But I can't go on, Brick. I—"

"Yellow!" Brick snapped. "You lost your guts because a skunk that needed it got killed. Yellow! That's what you are!"

"I'm not," Thad said hotly. "I'm not a killer either. I'm just not going with you."

"You'll go back to Las Flores an' give yourself up an' tell Charlie Farrel all about me an' where to find me, huh?" Brick snapped. "That's yore program, is it?"

"You know I won't do that," Thad said steadily. "You know—"

"I know yo're yellow as a sun-flower," Brick interrupted scornfully. "Why you little . . ." His voice rose angrily. Minutely, with a breadth of profanity that Thad had never suspected existed, Brick cursed the boy, detailing his ancestry, himself, and his lack of courage. Under the lash of Brick's tongue Thad flushed, and then slowly the anger arose in him until he snapped one word.

"Stop!"

Brick, eyes still bleak, glazed with anger, checked his tongue. "That's enough!" Thad told him harshly. "You can't talk to me like that!"

"You little yellow bellied pup! I can't talk to you, huh? Why—"

Brick's slicker, because of his injured arm, was open. Thad tore at the snaps of his own oilskin, pulling them open. "Go ahead!" Thad yelled, everything forgotten in his anger. "Get yore gun out. Get it, damn you!"

His slicker was open now. Hampered by it, he reached for the Bisley Colt. Brick had already thrust his hand under his own slicker. Thad's horse was fighting its head, shifting, slipping in the mud. Thad's hand touched the Bisley. Then Brick had his weapon clear of its holster. Suddenly he stopped.

"Quit it!" he snarled, and then, more slowly, "It would be murder. I can't."

Sanity returned swiftly to Thad. There sat Brick Mahoney on a motionless horse, a gun in his hand, his eyes wide with comprehension. On Brick's face was an odd play of emotion. Anger struggled with something else, and then the red face smoothed out and the wide eyes were normal again. Thad brought his own hand out from under his slicker, empty. Very slowly Brick put away his gun.

"All right, kid," Brick said. "You ain't yellow. I take it all back. I apologize. Is that enough, kid?"

"It's enough," Thad said hoarsely.

"Then go on." Brick's voice was flat and lifeless. "I was crazy, I guess. Yo're right. You ought to split off. You ought to leave me. Go on, kid."

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He said no more; reining his horse around, he rode toward the south. And he did not look back. Thad followed the man with his eyes, quieting his own nervous horse, suddenly wanting to follow Brick.

Brick must have sensed that. He looked back at Thad, and through the rain Thad could see that Brick was smiling. "So long, kid," Brick called, and suddenly his horse began to lope.

THE curtain of the rain hanging between them made vision poor. Thad watched that loping horse and rider recede and grow dim in the rain; and then suddenly he kicked his own horse with spurless heels and bent forward in the saddle as the startled beast began to run. For Brick Mahoney's horse was down and Brick lay like a limp yellow bundle on the sodden ground. The horse scrambled up and ran a little distance and faced about to stand, reins hanging. But Brick Mahoney did not move.

When Thad reached Brick and flung himself down, he saw that Brick's face was taut and white with agony. He reached out his hands to pull the man up, and then stopped. "It's my arm, kid," Brick gasped. "I've broke it this time."

Thad, kneeling beside Brick, got his hands under the man and lifted him. "I'll get you in, Brick," Thad promised. "I'll stick with you."

"Yo're a good kid," Brick Mahoney mumbled.

Thad raised Brick, supporting him until he managed to sit alone. He caught Brick's horse and brought the animal back. He helped Brick mount, first adjusting the sling until Brick, through clenched teeth, said that his arm was fine and that he could ride.

Then Thad mounted his own horse and fell in beside Brick, eyes alert and watchful, ready instantly to help his companion. Together they rode toward the south, bordering along the foothills, neither knowing where they were going, both knowing that they must keep on.

The rain fell steadily, heavily, and the clouds were low, and time went by endlessly until dusk began to fall. Far ahead, through that dusk, Thad Breathea saw a pinpoint of light. He headed toward it.

Brick was reeling in the saddle when they reached the light. Thad was leading Brick's horse. Brick would not talk. When Thad asked him how he was, he answered, "All right," the words so distorted that Thad could hardly understand them.

The light came from a little rock house set against the flank of a hill, and as they reached the house Thad's horse tossed up his head and neighed a greeting. Thad dismounted stiffly. Here was shelter. Here was a place where he could take Brick, where he could make Brick comfortable and warm.

What reception he would meet he did not know, but he was grimly certain that Brick should have the things he needed. He opened his mouth to call to the house and the words checked upon his lips. It was unnecessary, the door of the house opened and a man called: *"Quién es?"*

"I need help," Thad called. "Come out here."

"Quién es?" came the call again, and a squat-bodied man appeared in the doorway, silhouetted by the light.

"Come out and help me!" Thad commanded. "I need help."

THE man came from the door into the rain. Cautiously he approached Thad and Brick and the horses. A woman stood in the light of the door now, and Thad could see a child's head peering from behind her. The squat man was at the horses, looking at Brick, staring at Thad.

"Qué quieres?" he demanded. *"Quién es?"*

"You've got to help me get him down," Thad said desperately. "I've got to have help."

The squat man turned to the house and called, "Terecita! *Ven acá!"* and the child that had hidden behind the woman, a thin girl of perhaps twelve, came running out

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into the rain. The squat man spoke rapidly in Spanish and the child looked up at Thad.

"My father esays w'at do you want?" she asked slowly.

"I've got a hurt man here," Thad answered. "I've got to get him to shelter."

The girl interpreted the words and the swarthy face of the squat man lighted and he smiled. *"Seguro,"* he said. *"Seguro, señor."*

"Help me get him down," Thad commanded, and reached up for Brick. The squat man moved to Thad's side. It was he who detached Brick's clenched hand from the saddle-horn and, with Thad helping, eased Brick to the ground. Brick could not stand and Thad put his arm under Brick's shoulder and half-carried him toward the house, the swarthy man aiding and the girl pattering along beside them.

They took Brick into the little room. Thad lowered him to a bed while the owner of the house stood by and a fat woman dressed in calico and with her braids flapping, scurried back and forth, repeating over and over again, *"El pobre! El pobre!"*

Thad straightened up and looked from the woman to the man and then to the little girl. The man was speaking to the child, his Spanish swift and sibilant. The girl nodded, turned and faced Thad, her hands clasped behind her, her eyes shy and yet looking squarely into Thad's.

"My father," the girl said, "ees esay you are welcome, *señor*. You an' your fran."

CHAPTER IX

PRIDE OF STILLWATER

THERE were vines on the porch of the Lazy 5 headquarters and in the summer it was a cool place, if any spot below the Rim could be called cool. The country below the Rim being a thousand feet lower than the mesa whereon Las Flores was built, it was always hotter than the upper country.

Dale Krespin sat with his feet cocked on the rail of his vine-covered porch, and beside him Ben Prince, thin cigarette between his brown fingers, stared moodily out across the yard. Krespin's mouth was drawn down at the corners, and there were deep wrinkles about his eyes.

"I'll have to pay him," Krespin said, his voice nearly a groan. "There's no way out of it."

Ben Prince's musical voice had been trained in the chapel choir at Stillwater when Ben occupied a cell in that distinguished penitentiary. It was pleasant to listen to now, even if the words were not.

"You tried to save two hundred dollars on the Breathea kid," Prince drawled. "Now Croates is bracin' you for a thousand, an' that's just the beginnin'. You'll pay him and pay him, an' then Breathea will turn up and make good his claim on the estate. You're a damned fool, Dale, and you're too chinchy to live!"

Krespin did not answer his foreman's statement, and Prince amplified further. "You played it smart with old Jake. I'll give you that. You worked on him till he tore up his old will where he split his estate. You whined around and tried to get him to make a new will leaving it all to you. Before he could do that he died.

"You done all right then too; you got yourself appointed administrator an' you were gettin' things nicely into your hands until this kid turned up. Then you lost what sense you had.

"You tried to kill the kid by givin' him that Diamond Bar bay. The horse reared an' threw himself back all right, but the kid got free, so you killed the horse." Prince flicked ashes from his cigarette and drew upon it again.

"Then," he continued, "you took the kid to town. All you had to do was give him two hundred dollars. He'd of signed a release that would have cleared any claim he had on the estate.

"But you couldn't do that. The kid got into a jackpot and you seen a chance to

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get by without payin' the two hundred. You thought you'd save a dime. Now the kid's out of jail an' what have you got? A headache, if you ask me."

"How was I to know?" Krespin snapped. "He was arrested for helpin' Mahoney an' his boys."

"You ought," Prince interrupted, "to of got him out an' paid him the two hundred an' got that release signed. Then you'd of been clear. In place of that you said you'd never seen him before. You're a ripe damned fool, Dale!"

Krespin stared moodily out across the yard. Prince took a last drag on his cigarette and threw it away.

"And old Jake left all this," Prince said, "an' no will. An' the kid stands a chance to get it all. He's blood kin an' you're not, Dale."

"He won't get it," Krespin snarled. "I spent my life buildin' up this place. It belongs to me. Breathea won't get it!"

Prince grinned in sardonic amusement. "You ain't forgettin' that I'm your pardenr, are you Dale?" he asked.

"I don't forget nothin'," Krespin answered with asperity. "But this Breathea boy—"

"Now," Prince interrupted again, his fingers busy as he rolled another cigarette, "young Breathea is on the run. The law's after him an' after him hard. He's with Brick Mahoney and Brick is a slippery fellow to catch. An' Brick's smart.

"But there's ways of getting to Brick that the law don't know about. And the only way that you an' me can be sure of Thad Breathea is to have him out of the way."

KRESPIN darted a quick glance at his foreman. "How do you mean?" he demanded. He leaned forward a little.

"You ain't never been on the dodge, have you, Dale?" Prince said slowly. "I know you ain't. You been busy doing what old Jake told you, all your life. It's different with me. I never was a home guard. I've been around.

"I know some boys that know Brick Mahoney, an' they'd know where he'll go. I'll get to 'em and they'll rub out Brick, and Thad Breathea along with him. It'll cost us, but it won't cost us as much as havin' Breathea come back here an' claim his grand-daddy's estate. You'll have to put up some money, but it'll be worth it."

Krespin's eyes studied Prince's face. Slowly he nodded. "All right," he said grudgingly, "all right, Ben. But I don't want to know nothin' about it."

Prince smiled. "Squeamish, huh?" he asked. "All right. You won't know nothin' about it. Now about that letter: Ten High Croates wrote you that he had some documents of value to you and that they'd cost you a thousand dollars. He isn't goin' to hand them over for any thousand. He wants a cut. Well, he'll get it."

"You mean I've got to divide with him?" he demanded. "Do you mean I've got to hand over more money to him?"

"Every dollar you spend makes fifty cents less for me," Prince drawled. "I don't like to lose money any more than you do. The way to pay Ten High Croates is to get him out of the way."

"You—" Krespin began.

"Me!" Prince snapped. "I won't leave the job to any bungler. I'll do it myself."

"But . . ." Krespin expostulated.

"There ain't any 'but' about it," Prince said smoothly. "I'll do it and you can bet on it that nobody'll know. You an' me will be in the clear. Now here's what we'll do: There's a dance every Saturday night at Tony Lazolli's place in Las Flores. On Saturday you'll go into town an' you'll see Ten High, but without the money.

"You'll tell him that you won't give him the money until that night an' that you'll meet him at Tony's dance an' hand it over an' take the documents. It'll be that letter that Thad Breathea lost. I don't know how Ten High got it, but he's got it. You won't go to Lazolli's.

"You'll hunt up somebody an' stay with 'em. You'll have an alibi. Ten High will go to Tony's an' when the dance breaks up he'll be dead."

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"How—"

"I'll stake out a horse every few miles between here an' Las Flores," Prince said. "I can make the thirty miles in just about an hour an' a half. I'll be with the boys at the branding camp. I'll tell them that I've got to come to the ranch.

"I'll ride out from camp an' I'll be gone long enough to go to the house an' back to camp, and in that time I'll go to Las Flores an' see Mr. Croates, an' be back again.

"That's what I'll do. And if anybody asks any questions the boys at the camp will know where I was all the time."

Prince looked at Krespin. "And if you try to go back on me, Dale," he said softly, "I'll slip a knife into yore belly. You sabe?"

Dale Krespin shivered.

Prince got up. "Today's Monday," he said. "I'll ride up on top this afternoon. I want to make some connections. You get yourself ready to part with about a thousand dollars, Dale. It'll cost you that to get Brick Mahoney an' Thad Breathea killed. I'm goin' up an' locate a few boys I know. I'll be back day after tomorrow, I reckon, and the brandin' crew will just have to do without me. So long, Dale."

Ben Prince got up and left the porch. Dale Krespin watched his foreman's slim figure as Prince walked across the yard and turned the corner of the house, to go to the corral. He was still looking at the corner when Prince reappeared astride his horse. Prince lifted a hand and rode on toward the north, and once more Dale Krespin shivered. As Prince was lost to view, the ranchman got up and went into the house.

For a long time he sat at Jake Breathea's old battered desk. Then at last he grunted and half-turned in the chair. "Do the dirty work," he growled, facing in the direction that Prince had taken. "Go ahead an' do it. But if you think I'm goin' to give you half of this . . ." Krespin stopped. His expression altered suddenly. "You ain't the only one that can kill a man, Prince," he muttered. "Not the only one."

CHAPTER X

THE GAMBLER'S SATURDAY NIGHT

BEN PRINCE rode north until he reached the road that climbed the Rim. He followed that road leisurely but when the road turned south toward Las Flores, Prince went on toward the west.

He crossed the Flores river at a little-used ford, and at dusk he came to the edge of the hills. There at a sheep camp he stopped and partook of boiled mutton and chili; then, because the day was long and darkness had not yet fully come, he rode on into the hills.

He stopped that night beneath a pine tree, and he slept peacefully on his saddle blanket, while his hobbled horse grazed close by. In the morning Prince's breakfast was a cigarette and the morning breeze; he caught his horse and saddled and rode on.

By ten o'clock he was in the little rincon where Silk Gerald and Curly Winters had parted from Thad and Brick Mahoney. Skirting the rincon, Ben Prince rode out toward the west and continued on into the hills. Seemingly he knew the path.

At noon he stopped his horse above a valley in the mountains; then he rode on down toward the smoke that arose in a lazy spiral from a house set close to the edge of the timber bordering the valley. Reaching the house, Prince dismounted and walked confidently toward the door. He had almost reached it when a man, bearded and unkempt, appeared and stood surveying him hostilely.

Ben Prince stopped. "Hello Arch," he said.

The man grunted surlily, and Prince came up to him. "Are Silk and Curly around?" he asked.

"Who are they?" Arch demanded. "I don't know nobody by that name, Prince."

Ben Prince laughed. "Arch," he remarked, "if I told what I know about you, they'd hang you. Have you seen Silk or Curly?"

Arch did not answer. Silk Gerald came around the corner of the cabin, his hands

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hanging loose at his sides. He stopped, looked at the visitor and then said: "Hello, Ben."

"Hello, Silk," Prince answered. "I see you got here all right."

"I got here," Silk agreed. "Did you want to see me, Ben?"

"You and Curly," Prince agreed.

"Curly's comin'," Silk said.

Curly Winters came strolling from the timber, a rifle over his arm. He nodded to Prince as he came up, and rested the butt of the Winchester on the ground.

"You look better than you did the last time I saw you," Prince told him. "Seems like this climate agrees with you better than the climate at Stillwater."

Curly grinned. "It's a lot healthier," he agreed.

"Is Brick around?" Prince asked.

Curly and Silk looked at each other. Curly began to frown.

"I see he isn't," Prince said smoothly. "You boys an' Brick split up?"

"The damned fool pulled out on us," Curly said brusquely. "Brick's losin' his grip. He went off with some ring-tailed kid that we taken out of the Las Flores jail. Silk an' me are through with Brick."

DELIBERATELY Prince sat down, cross-legged, on the ground. "Now listen, boys," he said, "you know me an' you know I've been right with you. I want to put you in line to make some money."

Curly likewise sat down. Silk stood, with his legs wide spread. "We're listenin'," Silk announced.

"There's a thousand dollars in it for the men that kill Brick Mahoney an' the kid that's with him," Ben Prince said. "A thousand dollars, cash on the barrelhead."

"On account of that Kettleman thing?" Silk asked, his eyes narrow.

Ben Prince had not heard of Kettleman's death but he concealed his surprise and nodded. "On account of that," he agreed. "Now I can't say any more.

"But if somebody would come ridin' in to the old Breathea ranch an' found me sittin' on the porch an' was to say: 'Brick Mahoney's dead an' so is that kid that was with him,' an' then could prove it, I'd say: 'Walk right in the office boys an' help yourself to the cigars.' And when they opened the box they'd find money in place of cigars in it."

"Kettleman," Curly murmured, "was a pretty fair friend of mine. I rode with Kettleman once."

"I've got no friends," Silk Gerald said. "I don't ride with nobody. Arch has about got dinner ready, Ben. You'll eat with us?"

"Thanks," said Ben Prince, getting up. "I'll do that. I'm pretty gaunt."

The surly Arch had set the dinner on the table. Ben Prince talked easily of Las Flores, of the country below, of what was going on at Gato, Trinity and Albuquerque. After the meal, while Arch washed the dishes, Prince seated himself outside the cabin with Curly and Silk.

"You ridin' back this evenin', Ben?" Curly questioned.

"Right away," Ben Prince answered.

"Me an' Silk like cigars," Curly remarked. "Likely we'll drop in before long an' cage a smoke off you."

"You do that," Ben Prince said. "You're always welcome, Curly. I guess I'll pull along now. I've got a ways to go.

He walked out to his horse. Mounting, he looked back toward the cabin. Silk and Curly stood beside the door and Arch was looking through it.

"So long boys," Ben Prince called. "I'll see you."

Ben Prince rode off toward the east.

When Prince had disappeared, Curly rolled a cigarette. "So we're goin' to snuff out Brick an' the kid an' collect some money," he drawled. "Wonder why Ben wants 'em killed. He never was a friend to Kettleman."

Silk continued to stare moodily at the spot where Prince had dropped from sight. "It ain't Brick he wants," Silk said. "He kept draggin' in the kid. It's the kid he's really after."

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"An' we're goin' to do it?" Curly demanded.

"We said we would, didn't we?"

"A thousand dollars," Curly mused. "I could use a thousand dollars, but where would Ben Prince get that much?"

"He's workin' for a man that's got it," Silk suggested. "You know, Curly . . ."

"Yeah?"

"There might be more than a thousand in it. Ben wanted that kid out of the way mighty bad."

"So?" Curly took a long drag on his cigarette.

"So," Silk said, "we'll scout around a little before we do much. Brick will head back to Franklin anyhow, an' hole up there. It will take him a while to do that, an' we'll have to go to Frankin to find him. We might spend a little time findin' out a few things before we move."

Curly laughed. "You want to see Pearl anyhow. Yo're stuck on her."

"What if I am?" Silk snapped. "Sure I want to see Pearl. An' I'll get her to pry around a little for us too. She's stayin' at Lulu Black's an' Lulu is a wise old bird."

SATURDAY was a gala day in Las Flores. On Saturday the ranchmen and sheepmen, the small farmers, came to town and did their shopping. They met acquaintances, and the plaza of Las Flores was filled with rapid Spanish and the slower drawl of English. On Saturday afternoon Ten High Croates, pushing through Lulu's door, interrupted her slumber.

"He's bit!" Ten High announced jubilantly. "I seen him. He's bit!"

Lulu sat up and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. She scowled at the dapper little man, and then quickly the scowl vanished.

"You got the money?" she demanded.

Ten High shook his head. "Not yet. I get it tonight," he answered. "He's goin' to meet me tonight in Lazolli's place, at the dance. He'll give me the money an' I give him them letters an'—"

"Don't be a damned fool," Lulu scoffed. "He'll give you the money an' you'll give him *one* of the letters. He'll have to give us more than one thousand dollars before he gets both of 'em. You give me them letters, Ten High. I'll keep 'em. I know how to get the money out of this."

Ten High, surveying Lulu's firm jaw, nodded his head slowly. "All right. Which letter will we give him, Lulu?"

"The one that Carl Breathea wrote to him." Lulu chuckled. "It's his, ain't it?"

Ten High stared at Lulu thoughtfully. "You know," he said, "there ain't any need to give him either letter. We'll keep them both, Lulu. An' he can pay us for keepin' our mouths shut. That's what he can do!"

Propped up on one elbow on the bed, Lulu frowned. "You get the money an' don't forget my cut," she ordered. "Don't you forget that."

"Sure," Ten High agreed and departed jauntily.

Two doors down the hall from Lulu's room he stopped. He looked back to see that he was not observed, tapped softly with his finger tips and opened the door. A henna-haired girl, her face heavily made up, turned in a chair and half arose as Ten High entered.

"What did you come in for?" she demanded, her voice a sharp whisper. "If Lulu saw you come in here—"

"She didn't see me, Pearl," Ten High interrupted, his voice also low. "Anyhow, after tonight we won't care a damn about Lulu. He's goin' to come across, Pearl."

"You mean Krespin?"

"Yeah, I mean that Krespin's goin' to pay me for keepin' still about what I know." Ten High chuckled. "He don't want old Jake's grandson showin' up an' spoilin' his game. You get packed, Pearl. I'll get the money from Krespin tonight an' then we'll pull out for the south. How about it, honey? You an' me ought to do right well together down around El Paso or Silver City."

Pearl moved toward the man, her body sinuous. Placing her hands on Ten High's shoulders, the girl lifted her face and

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kissed him. "Won't Lulu froth at the mouth!" She giggled. "She'll be crazy mad."

Ten High thrust out his narrow chest. "Forget about Lulu. You get packed. I'll meet you an' we'll pull out."

"You'd better go now," Pearl whispered. "Lulu might come in. Wait till I look out an' see if the hall's empty." She moved to the door and peered out.

"All clear," Pearl whispered. With a grin, Ten High slipped through the door.

AT TEN o'clock Saturday night, Charlie Farrel sat in the sheriff's office in the Las Flores courthouse and sucked upon a long-dead pipe, considering the toes of his boots which were propped up on the sheriff's desk. Las Flores on a Saturday night was full of life and energy, and while Lon Popples, the town marshal, and his deputies handled matters as a rule, still Farrel stayed awake Saturday nights.

Steps sounded in the courthouse corridor and Farrel removed his feet from the desk top. The door of the sheriff's office was open and through it a man walked into the light. "Hello Charlie," the newcomer said.

"Why, hello Mr. Krespin," Farrel answered. "Come in and sit down."

Dale Krespin chose a chair and seated himself. He brought two cigars from his pocket, passed one to Farrel and bit off the end of the other. Farrel struck a match and when the cigars were lighted, he reseated himself. His eyes were narrow as he looked at Krespin.

"Anything on your mind, Mr. Krespin?" he asked.

Krespin puffed smoke, and nodded. "We're brandin'," he said. "Our calves ain't tallyin' out. I'm wonderin' about it."

"I thought," Farrel murmured, "that when Kettleman was killed this calf stealin' would stop. I thought Mahoney did us a favor when he downed Kettleman, an' him an' that kid got away. We couldn't pin it on Kettleman but we had our ideas of who was stealin' cattle."

"You ain't found out a thing about Mahoney an' that kid?" Krespin asked.

"We're still lookin'," Farrel answered. "We got a tip today that we're goin' to look into tomorrow mornin'. We—"

He broke off. Again there were footfalls in the corridor. A man was running through the courthouse, coming to the sheriff's office. Both Krespin and Farrel got to their feet.

The running man reached the door and panted out his message. "Popples wants you right away, Charlie. There was a killin' down at Tony Lazolli's place. Ten High Croates got shot."

"I'll be right down!" Charlie Farrel said briskly. "You'll have to excuse me, Mr. Krespin. I'll talk to you later on. I've got business now."

CHAPTER XI

CAVE FOR WANTED MEN

THAD BREATHEA and Brick Mahoney occupied a cave. They had been there for a week and were accustomed to the dim light, the rock walls and the sturdy smell of goat that pervaded the place.

Occasionally a bearded billy or a nanny with yellow eyes appeared in the opening of the cave and stared curiously at the interlopers. By looking out the doorway of the cavern, Thad could generally see a kid perched on a sharp pointed rock, playing King of the Castle with its fellows.

When evening came, Alfredo Vara or Rufina Vara or little Terecita came to pen the goats, driving them down the hill. Then there was a long twilight and presently footsteps rattled on the loose rock; it was Alfredo or Rufina trudging up the slope, bringing hot goat stew seasoned with chili, or frijoles, or tortillas for the occupants of the cave.

There was water in the cave, and two blankets; the two saddles lay on their sides against the wall. Life in the cave was pleasant enough, except for the goats, and even the goats afforded some amuse-

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ment. But staying there was dangerous too; the two men were under constant tension.

Brick, his arm splinted and in a sling, fretted against the restraint. Thad worried, hidding his worry from Brick. Little Terecita enjoyed the strange visitors and exercised her English on Thad. Rufina, always with the fat baby, Tomaso, astride her hip, came occasionally to look to the well-being of her guests; and Alfredo, squat and swarthy and friendly, spent long minutes crouched against the wall, conversing in Spanish with Brick Mahoney. But always there was a restraint, a bridled fear hovering over the cave in the hillside.

For the first few days Brick had been feverish and had required constant attention. Then, although the fever lingered, he was much better. Now the fever was gone and in place of anxiety over Brick, another anxiety held Thad's mind. At first he had carried water for Brick to drink and to bathe Brick's face. He had learned to roll cigarettes, and he had performed a hundred small tasks for the red-haired man.

With money that Brick furnished, Alfredo had gone to town and there made sundry purchases: shirts, underwear, socks, Levi Strauss overalls, and tobacco. These had been brought to the cave.

Rufina, giggling at some comment from Brick, had taken the soiled clothing and washed it and brought it back neatly ironed. Even Thad's suit trousers had been washed and ironed, but they were shrunk so pitifully that he could not wear them. Alfredo had provided a razor and Thad had shaved Brick and himself. All these things had helped to kill time, to make life bearable in the cave.

Too, Thad and Brick had spent long hours in talk; Thad had been told the history of Brick Mahoney, outlaw. Brick had stolen, he had raided, he had taken what he wished; and he recounted those adventures lustily. But in spite of the lurid adventures and the boasting, a strangely appealing picture of Brick Mahoney grew in Thad's mind.

It was the picture of a youngster who hadn't much, of a lonely half-starved kid in an arid wasteland where he struggled for an existence and watched others gain the things that were denied him. Thad saw that boy growing up, learning that the strong took what they wanted and that the weak did not survive, learning that the law was on the side of strength—finally rebelling against that knowledge.

Thus the days had passed with Brick's arm knitting and the wound apparently healing clean. And now the day was Sunday and once again Brick and Thad sat close by the entrance to the cave and Brick was talking.

"I was about sixteen," Brick drawled. "I worked for old man Cotton. Cotton didn't have the money an' when the Cross V pushed him he couldn't hire the men he needed. An' so we got licked. A few of us stuck with him when the showdown come an' we done what we could, but we got beat. So we run.

"The law was after us because the Cross V had hired 'em. Well . . . that's the way it goes. I made a livin' stealing Cross V cattle then, an' after that I kind of branched out. I'd do it again, too. Roll me another pill kid, will you?"

Thad rolled the cigarette, put it in Brick's mouth and lighted it, and Brick puffed contentedly. "An' if Cotton had won," Brick said suddenly, "I'd of stayed with him. I'd of had my own place by now, an' Kettleman an' them would of been the ones to run."

BRICK looked narrowly at Thad when he said that name, and Thad turned his head away. He could still see Kettleman sprawling on the floor, his hand reaching out for the gun at the tips of his fingers.

"It could easy of been me, kid," Brick Mahoney said.

"You think we're all right here?" Thad asked abruptly, changing the subject.

"For now," Brick answered. "Alfredo will look after us. You don't need to worry about Alfredo, kid." Brick grinned.

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"You don't sabe a Mexican. There ain't no better people when they like you. Alfredo figures that we're his company an' there ain't nothin' he won't do for company. An' I've give Alfredo some money too. Alfredo's all right."

"We can't stay here forever," Thad said.

"No," Brick agreed. "My arm's goin' to be all right. We'll travel pretty soon."

"Where will we go?"

"I belong around Franklin," Brick answered. "I got some friends there an' that's where we'll head. I ain't been in this country long. Just long enough to look it over an' scout out that bank job.

"Silk's the one that knows this country. Him an' Curly. He took us around an' showed us a few things. Silk knew about Branch Long's place an' he knew about another hideout over the hill. I guess that's where him an' Curly went when they left us. Silk didn't say that Kettleman was at Long's, an' Branch didn't say nothin' about it either, when you an' me got there. I wouldn't have gone to Long's if I'd known Kettleman was holdin' it down."

Brick's voice trailed away. Thad moved to the door of the cavern.

"You know, kid," Brick said suddenly, "you was right about you an' me. We're goin' to have to split up. You go south with me an' after we're clear of here, you get you a ridin' job. You wasn't cut out for this business."

Thad made no answer. He squatted by the mouth of the cave.

"You can't stay here," Brick mused. "They've got you tabbed. You're with me an' that makes you an outlaw."

Thad spoke rebelliously. "Why? I didn't do anything but hold the horses and I didn't know what was happening then. If Krespin had told the truth they wouldn't even have put me in jail."

Brick shrugged. He knew Thad's story —knew it all. "It's not what might of happened, but what did happen," he said. "This fellow Krespin lied. I don't know why he done it, an' neither do you, but he did.

"Mebbe he wanted to stay out of trouble. Mebbe he wanted you out of the way; we don't know. But he said he'd never seen you. An' so they put you in jail because you held our horses. But it ain't just that anymore, kid. You was with me at Long's. It'll be murder now. That's what they want us for."

"I could go in an' give myself up," Thad said stubbornly. "I could get Judge Althen to come down from Fort Blocker. He'd tell them who I was. That would clear me."

Brick shook his head. "You went to jail in Las Flores once," he said. "Did they listen to you then? No they didn't. They slapped you around an'—"

"But Farrel didn't slap me around," Thad interrupted. "He treated me all right. He—"

"An' we come back an' took you away from Farrel," Brick snapped. "Who'd believe you now, kid? Nobody. Not a soul. It ain't that I want you to go bad, kid. You know I don't want that. But I know how this law business works. Yo're guilty until you prove yourself innocent an' you'd have a hell of a time doin' that.

"They want somebody to show for the bank robbery an' for that business up at Long's. If you went in an' gave yourself up they'd railroad you. That's what they'd do. Your chance is to stick with me an' get out of the country; then if you want to get yore Wyomin' lawyer an' come back here, you can do it. That's the way to work it."

Thad made no answer. His face was set in stubborn, obstinate lines. Brick, watching his companion, puffed on his cigarette.

"Just the same I'm goin' to give myself up," Thad said suddenly. "Alfredo's coming up the hill, headed here."

ALFREDO arrived at the entrance of the cave, out of breath from the climb. He sat down in the shade, panting and grinned at Thad. When he recovered his breath, he spoke to Brick.

Watching Brick's face, Thad saw that Alfredo's words brought alarm to his com-

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panion. Brick said, *"Mil gracias,* Alfredo." He turned to Thad.

"Alfredo thinks we're located," he announced. "His cousin was here yesterday an' saw our horses. Alfredo says his cousin can't be trusted an' he says that a deputy sheriff asked him a lot of questions when he was in town gettin' that stuff for us. It looks like we'd better leave, kid."

"I'm not going," Thad said stubbornly. "I'm going to give myself up."

"I can't stop you," Brick snapped, "but you can take it from me, it's a fool idea. I'm goin' to get out of here, kid, an' I'm goin' right now. Alfredo . . ." He turned and spoke to Vara again.

Alfredo grunted, nodded, said: *"Si . . . si . . ."* Getting up, he went down the hill toward the house.

"Look kid," Brick said. "You'd better come with me."

Thad shook his head.

Brick sighed. "Well then," he said, "if ever you want to get hold of me, if this fool idea of yores don't work out an' you're lucky enough to get away, you go south to Franklin. You get hold of Arch Heibert at the Palace saloon in Franklin an' you tell him who you are. He'll know where I am an' he'll put you in touch with me. I wish you'd go with me, kid."

"No," Thad said, but there was indecision in his voice. "I'll saddle for you, Brick. Here . . ." He bent down and picked up Brick's saddle, hesitated an instant and then lifted his own saddle in his other hand.

Brick had stepped to the mouth of the cave, carrying the bridles and blankets in his good hand. When Thad joined him there, Brick was staring away toward the south.

"There's men on the road," Brick said. "Headed this way." He started down the hill. Alfredo was coming from the canyon, leading the two horses. Down behind Alfredo Vara's little rock house Thad saddled Brick's horse and then his own. Alfredo talked to Brick and the redhead answered in monosyllables, watching Thad narrowly. Alfredo went to the corner of the house, looked out, and made an announcement to Brick.

"It's the sheriff," Brick said. "Alfredo knows him."

Thad held out his hand. "So long, Brick," he said. "You'll have time enough. I'll ride out to them."

Brick seized Thad's hand. "Yo're a good kid," Brick said. "Mebbe it's the right thing to do, but I don't think so. Good luck, Thad, an' don't forget what I told you."

"I won't," Thad promised. He grinned at Alfredo, mounted, and rode out from behind the house, heading toward the south.

Brick waited an instant and then climbed awkwardly into his own saddle. Fumbling in his pocket, he produced a bill and thrust it into Alfredo's hand.

"Mil gracias, amigo," Brick said. *"Yo creo—"* He stopped abruptly.

Thad's voice came floating up to the two men behind the house.

"I give myself up," Thad Breathea called. "I—"

A shot, flat and harsh, punctuated the words, breaking them. Brick Mahoney pulled his horse around and, without looking at Alfredo, rode out from the shelter of the house.

TO THE south, down on the flat, he could see Thad Breathea sitting his horse, his hand lifted in the old, old sign of the plainsmen and the Indian—the peace sign. Beyond Thad the horsemen, five of them, had fanned out until they made a semi-circle and were coming on, coming fast.

As Brick watched, one of those advancing riders drew rein and lifted his arm until it was level. Again the report of a gun came across the flat; then Thad Breathea whirled his horse and came tearing back toward Brick. With a curse Brick kicked with his heels and his horse leaped ahead.

In a sweeping curve—for Thad had changed direction—Brick rode to meet his partner. Beyond them the possemen, ham-

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pered momentarily by a deep-sided arroyo, checked their horses and milled as they sought a crossing. Brick's horse, running at top speed, swept in beside Thad's; Brick's voice was shrill as he called:

"Come on kid!"

Thad, bent low in his saddle, shouted back inarticulately. Side by side they pounded toward the east.

Thad and Brick gained in that first wild dash. Their pursuers, delayed by the arroyo, their horses already a little tired because of the long trip from Las Flores, were no match for the fresh mounts of the men they followed. Brick, his jaws clamped because of the pain in his arm, looked back from time to time and presently pulled his horse into a slower gait. Thad also pulled down his horse and looked back. The posse was a mile behind them now, coming steadily, horses and men bobbing across the flat. Brick gasped:

"Stay ahead of 'em. It'll be dark—"

Instantly the idea was plain to Thad. They could not run off and leave their pursuers. Horseflesh would not stand that, but they could at least stay ahead. Barring bad luck or an accident, they could maintain their lead. And after awhile night would come and then they might shake off the posse.

Thad rode close to Brick. He could see the agony that the pounding gait brought to the red-haired man. Brick's face was twisted, but he held his saddle strongly.

"Can you make it, Brick?" Thad demanded. "Can you?"

"What . . . happened?"

"I rode out to meet them," Thad answered. "I was going to give myself up. Before I got to them one of them shot at me. It was Krespin. I stopped and he shot again. Then I saw you come out and I circled back. Can you make it?"

The two dropped into a fold of ground. Looking back, they saw their pursuers were lost to sight. Brick and Thad turned north along the little ridge, crossed the depression and topped out on the other side. Now once more they could see that dogged pursuit. Brick was holding his injured arm now, using his right hand to support it, his reins swinging free from the fingers of his bad hand.

"I wish I knew the country better," he said. "There's a rimrock east of us. We went the wrong way. The hills would have been better."

"We can circle—" Thad began.

"An' be cut off," Brick cut in. "We've got to go on."

Thad said no more. The country rolled away toward the east. Behind them the hills grew more and more distant, but always, against those hills, they could see the bobbing spots of black that were horsemen following them. At length Brick pulled down his horse once more and Thad did the same. The horses trotted, breathing hard, sweating. The bobbing dots of black came on.

"We're better mounted," Brick Mahoney said, "an' the horses are fresh an' it's two hours to sundown. We'll make it all right, kid. We'll get away."

"And to hell with them!" Thad said viciously. "I was goin' to give myself up. I was going to go back to Las Flores and send for Judge Althen and clear it all up. They wouldn't let me: they took a shot at me when I had my hands up. I'll go with you, Brick. I'll stick with you."

CHAPTER XII

RIDE, OUTLAW

BY DUSK the two fugitives had shaken off the pursuit. The bobbing black dots were no longer visible behind them. Breathea and Brick Mahoney knew that the pursuit clung, following tracks, determined, relentless; but with the posse no longer visible the tension was eased.

At dusk they came to the rim, the broken country they rode through presaging the nearness of that great descent. Their horses were played out. Still the two kept their tired animals slogging ahead.

They must go down below the rim; they must keep on. Only distance and time could help them, and in that country of mounted men a man on foot was helpless.

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The Rim broke off before them, a great lava caprock, crevassed by a hundred thousand winters. Cedars grew in the lava where scanty earth had formed. Great chunks of lava had broken off and added to the entangling maze of rock. Go down they must, and so they sought for a pathway for descent, with but scant time to find it.

"We can make it here," Brick announced. "We'll have to lead our horses."

There was a possible path below them, a path that would tantalize a burro and be a highway for a mountain goat. Thad, dismounting, surveyed it. "Think you can, Brick?" he asked, looking at his companion's injured arm.

"Hell," said Brick Mahoney, and laughed, "I got to!"

Thad went down first. Leading his horse, sliding and slipping over rocks, turning to coax the weary beast over some sheer drop where a boulder blocked the way. On a little bench he paused and by the sounds that came from above, estimated the progress of his companion. Brick too reached the bench and stopped, and in the waning light Thad could see the utter weariness and pain in the man's face.

"Go on, kid," Brick directed.

Thad went on. Here were no gentle slopes, no sweetly rolling hills; here was fierce nature and a drop that led to oblivion.

Now the bench they followed dwarfed away. Now came a hillside, sheer and precipitous and covered with stones that slid beneath their feet. The horses hung back, dropping their heads, searching for footing before they stepped from one uncertainty on to the next. Above Thad the rocks rattled and Brick Mahoney's voice was sharp with pain. Thad stopped. Again the rocks rolled and as they checked, Brick spoke again.

"Go on, kid."

They reached the second rim, not so sheer as the first, but affording problems of its own that must be solved in the dying light. Below that second rim, Thad stopped. Here was a wide bench, dotted by cedars, and here was a trail, a winding pathway made by moving cattle.

THEY could ride now. It was better to ride than to walk. Even a weary horse may be surefooted. Wordlessly Thad helped Brick to mount and then climbed into his own saddle. He could see above the cedars; toward the north he saw a light blink and then grow steady on the plain beneath. There was a house below. People must be avoided but horses were a necessity, and there might be horses at the house.

They rode on, following the winding cowtrack. The wide bench narrowed and stopped and the cowpath zig-zagged down a canyon side and leveled again. And now the horses, despite their weariness, cocked their ears and moved more rapidly.

The horses stopped and then moved ahead once more, half sliding down a steep embrasure in a bank. There were no rocks here but only earth. Then water gurgled about the horses' feet and the animals lowered their heads and sucked thirstily.

Brick Mahoney's voice was small and hoarse. "I guess I stay here, kid. I guess I'm done."

"I saw a light," Thad said.

"I seen it too."

"Mebbe—"

"I've hurt my arm again. Seems like that bandage slipped when I fell back on the hill. Kid—"

"Yes, Brick?"

"You go on."

"You an' me'll go on," Thad Breathea said. "There's sand on the other side. We'll rest awhile."

The horses splashed across the stream and stopped. Dismounting, Thad helped his companion to alight. He tied each horse to the saddle-horn of the other. He stretched Brick Mahoney on the sand and then went to the creek, dipped water in his hat and brought it back. Brick drank thirstily.

"That's right. You an' me'll go on. We got to have fresh horses, kid."

"We'll get 'em," assured Thad Breathea.

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He went to the horses and replaced his temporary tie with hobbles, twisting loops of soft rope around fore pasterns. He pulled off the saddles, the blankets, and the bridles. He lugged the gear back to Brick, dumped it down, and standing over his companion, he asked:

"How's the arm?"

"It hurts like hell," Brick said matter-of-factly. "The bandage slipped an' the splint slipped out."

"Do you want me—" Thad began.

"There's nothin' we can do about it tonight," Brick interrupted hastily. Thad sensed that Brick wanted the arm let alone, that Brick was about at the end of his rope.

"We shook 'em anyhow," Thad said.

Brick grunted. "They didn't reach the top before we were down," he said, speaking of the pursuing possemen. "They'd have taken a shot at us if they had. Come mornin' they'll find out where we went off the rim."

"And follow us?" Thad suggested.

Brick laughed grimly. "Not them. They got a respect for their necks. They'll find a trail an' then come down."

"So we've got a start," Thad said.

"A start, anyhow," Brick agreed.

"Then"—Thad sat down beside his companion—"give me your makings and I'll roll you a smoke and we'll lie down in the sand an' get some sleep."

Again Brick's chuckle came, not grim now. "I'll go you one," he said. "You know, kid, you learn awful fast. A week ago you'd have sat up all night worryin'."

"I'll let the other fellow worry from now on," Thad said, and there was as a new timbre, a new hardness in his voice. "Here you are, Brick."

A match flamed, briefly illuminating Brick's face. The smell of burning tobacco was pleasant, almost peaceful. "You said it was Krespin shot at you?"

"It was!"

"It looks like," Brick drawled, "that Krespin kind of wanted you out of the way, kid."

Thad was silent for a long minute. "I was going to give myself up," he repeated once more. "I called to 'em. They shot at me. A man can't do the right thing, Brick. They won't let him."

Brick maintained his silence and Thad, his voice hard and more bitter than Brick Mahoney had ever heard it, spoke again.

"I'll go south with you," he announced. "I'll stick along. But I'm not going to split off and get a ridin' job. They've made me an outlaw. All right, I'll be one. I've got the name; I might as well have what goes with it!"

"Kid," Brick's voice was sharp, "you don't want to—"

"To hell with the law," Thad snarled. "The law's crooked. From now on I'm on my own. You told me what would happen, Brick, an' you were right!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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Roman Holiday

By LESLIE T. WHITE
Author of "Semper Paratus"

This is for Christmas—the moving story of a has-been pug who stepped down from the ring for the last time with St. Nick at his side and with the sweet, clear bells ringing for him specially.

LITTLE Doc Jacobs made sure that Lonny Barrett was down at Moxie's training stable before he went over to the flat and broke the news to Lonny's wife. She took it bravely, the way she had taken all the other hard luck. She probably knew it before the doc came over. Fighter's wives know things like that without being told.

So when he arrived, she chased the two older kids out to play in the snow and sat there with the baby on her knee. The baby was too young to understand.

"It isn't going to hurt him," the doctor assured her. "He'll just get very tired some day, and go to sleep. It will come like that."

She sat very straight, squeezing the baby, and the little doctor knew the effort it cost her. "Isn't there anything—anyway . . .?" she began, then stopped. The baby cooed softly.

Doc Jacobs suddenly hated the fight game. He shook his head. "Really, there is no way," he said reluctantly. "Lonny's just absorbed too many punches. Multiple concussions have caused hemorrhages back in the brain and these have developed into a tumor. Also the optic nerves have begun to atrophy—" He paused when he saw the hurt his words were causing and spread his slender hands in a gesture of finality.

"When will he—when will it happen?"

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Her voice was almost steady.

Why doesn't she scream, and break this tension? "Not long now," he said gently. "That's why I came over. Perhaps a month, or not more than three at the most, Mrs. Barrett. I can't tell you how sorry—"

"Then you haven't told Lonny yet?"

He wagged his head. "Well, you see. Lonny doesn't—"

"I know," she finished for him. "Lonny doesn't understand any more. He thinks he's going to fight the Champ. Poor darling! He's down there training; everlastingly training. Still believing he's the leading contender." She sank her teeth into her lower lip.

"Ten years ago he was," said the little doctor. "Ten years ago he was the best of 'em. Young and strong, he was."

"Oh, I know what you're trying to say. He's an old man now, a broken old man. And he's thirty-six. Thirty-six! Why, Doctor, he should be just starting to live! My father was a young man at sixty!"

"Your father wasn't a fighter," the doctor reminded her. "Look, now. I've made arrangements to put him in a private hospital where he'll have the best of care. That will relieve you of the agony of having him around during the last—"

She hugged the baby until it cried and shook her head frantically. "No, no, not yet! Oh, not yet! He mustn't know. Let him have his last Christmas with the children."

"But *you,* Mrs. Barrett? The strain?"

"He's crazy about the boys." She brushed aside his objection. "We won't think of what's coming after that. No, we mustn't. I want this Christmas to be as nice, as beautiful, as we can afford." She stopped abruptly, and the little doctor understood. He reached for his wallet, but paused when he saw her expression.

"For the kids, perhaps . . ." he suggested.

She boosted the baby up on her shoulder and stood up. "You've been so very kind," she told him firmly. "I don't know what will happen after he leaves us, but until then, we'll do it as he would want it done." She added, "I wish he wouldn't go down to that gym. They make fun of him there."

He took his hat off his knees and came to his feet. "Lonny doesn't know they're teasing him," he said. "You mustn't feel sorry for him. He's awfully happy training away. And it doesn't hurt him any. He still has his friends who remember the night he went the distance with Dempsey. Not many fighters did that, Mrs. Barrett."

She looked over his shoulder, her mind going back over the years.

"As if I could ever forget that night," she murmured.

LONNY BARRETT was skipping rope in a corner of the gym when one of the boys brought Kid Leonetti over and introduced them as a gag. Moxie Conch had thought it up to give the boys a laugh. Lonny still believed that Moxie was his manager, and Moxie gave him a buck now and again as an "advance." Moxie liked to have a clown around the joint.

"Hey, Lonny! Lonny Barrett. Meet the comin' champ."

Lonny didn't hear very well at best, and the words were spoken into the lump on the left side of his head; the ear the buzzing was always in. So all he got was the one word "champ." He tossed the rope aside and thrust out his open hand.

"Hiya, Joe. When are we gonna—" He paused in bewilderment when the gang broke into gales of laughter. He squinted his eyes at the big fellow who still hung onto his hand. Then he grinned.

"I thought they said the Champ," he apologized.

Kid Leonetti smiled. He was a nice looking guy with a tanned, wedge-shaped body, flashing teeth in an unbattered face, and a good reach. He looked clean, inside as well as out.

"They said the coming champ," he told Lonny.

"The Kid's gonna knock Joe out frum under that sleepy puss of his next summer," put in Moxie, and winked at the boys. "That is if you ain't done it first, Lonny."

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The group waited for Lonny's retort. Lonny let go the Kid's big hand and said: "You'll have to lick me before that, Kid. I'm next at the title, unless you gimme the run-around like the rest of them bums."

The gang howled with laughter, especially Moxie. Lonny always slayed Moxie. Funniest stumblebum hanging around the racket. But Lonny, thinking they were for him, grinned and waited for Kid Leonetti to declare himself.

The kid didn't even smile. He put his hand on Lonny's shoulder. "You're a tough hurdle, Barrett. You've stopped the best of the big ones. I've always admired you." After that crack, he swung on his heel and walked away.

Moxie grimaced and said in a loud stage-whisper: "Atta keed, Lonny. He's a-scared of ya."

The boys guffawed, but Lonny was watching the Kid's broad shoulders pass through the door.

"That boy'll make a real fighter someday. He's built like me."

As the crowd drifted away, Lonny moved over to the light bag and started it drumming. His big body swayed rhythmically from the waist as he beat a tattoo on the leather, making it produce a music all its own.

"Lonny! Hey, stupe! *He-e-ey!*"

Lonny, paused, his right arm cocked, and glanced over his shoulder at little Spider Casson, the Mexican bantam, who leaned out of the training ring, shouting at him.

"You wanna work out for a little speed, Lonny? You'll need it for to keep away from Louis nex' summer."

Lonny grinned and bunted the bag with his elbow. "Sure, Spider, sure. I'll try'n not to hurt you." He picked up the gloves hanging by the ring. "Say, Sam—lace up these gloves, will ya boy?"

Big Sam limped over and laced the wrists. Sam was just the colored caretaker around Moxie's now, but once upon a time he had been a big name. He had reached his peak about the time Jack Johnson was going out. Because a broken leg had put him out of the ring before his heels got round, he still retained his senses. He was Lonny's friend.

He had been in Lonny Barrett's corner all those years when Lonny was on top, so he didn't join when the youngsters laughed at Lonny. There were a lot of guys laughing now who would be slap-happy themselves some day, if they weren't lucky enough to break a leg in the meantime.

When Lonny slid between the ropes, Big Sam sat down at the ringside to watch.

THE Spider was a squat little guy with a flat, cruel face, and shoe-button eyes. He was on his way up, so he was tough and cocky. He had a quick, jerky style, fast with either hand and he popped around the ring like a firecracker.

He liked to work out with the massive Lonny Barrett. It was like slugging the big bag, and just as safe. For Lonny wouldn't really hit a bantam in the first place, and his dimming eyes could not keep their focus on the speedy Mex.

Big Sam watched the two men and shook his head. He hated to see anybody so thoughtlessly cruel to an old guy on the way out. He wished that Lonny would trip the trigger on that big right hand of his just once as a lesson. Lonny could still hit, and he always gave a good performance. If his coordination wasn't what it used to be, that long, looping left still looked like a million.

The Spider was deliberately trying to draw blood on Lonny's battered old face. He wouldn't be able to do that if Lonny could use his eyes. Big Sam knew just how bad those eyes got after a couple of rounds. He knew, because Lonny Barrett had told him.

Lonny wasn't quite as goofy as the youngsters thought he was. Sure he was punchdrunk. Any fighter gets that way after getting his head dusted with leather for twenty years. But in his better moments Lonny knew what was happening; he knew his eyes were going fast and that the buzzing in his head wasn't caused by bees.

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But Big Sam was the only guy he would talk to about it. He was afraid Moxie might learn the truth and refuse to line up a fight with the champ. He didn't know that Moxie already knew; Big Sam never told him that. Let Lonny Barrett have his dreams, thought Big Sam. It don't hurt nobody. Sometimes Big Sam wished his own brain wasn't quite so cruelly lucid. It would be wonderful to believe you were still in the running, to work and train for a championship fight that wasn't coming, ever.

After four fast rounds the Spider wearied of his fun and waved the big fellow away. Lonny climbed down out of the ring and stood hopping from one foot to the other while Big Sam unlaced the long-wristed gloves.

"How'd I do, Sam?"

"Y'was lak a champ, boy," lied Big Sam. "That Mexican flea almos' kill hisself gettin' outta yo' way."

Lonny laughed. "Never'n better shape. I could take Louis tomorrow." He trotted into the showers and Big Sam retrieved his broom.

Sam was tempted to drag that old game leg of his into the ring and give some of these mental lightweights a lesson; he was sure he could still do it if they'd come to him. But he didn't dare speak out of turn.

They'd call him an old crippled dinge, and throw him out. He'd die if they took this away from him, for this was all he had left. True, he had a second's license, but nobody wanted him in their corner anymore. Nobody that is, except Lonny, and Lonny would never need a second again. So Big Sam hobbled around Maxie's, occasionally picking up an odd buck from the boys.

When Lonny came out of the showers, he crossed the gym and went into Moxie's office. Moxie was tilted back in his chair with his feet on the desk, reading *Variety*. He had always wanted to run a theatrical agency instead of peddling bloody beef. Actors might be a lot of hams, but even hams were better than the herd of stumblebums that cluttered up his gym these days.

LONNY breezed in buttoning his shirt. "Look Moxie, how about this Kid Leonetti? They ain't tryin' to run him in ahead of me with Joe, are they?"

Moxie let *Variety* fall on his outstretched legs while he removed the cold cigar from his teeth with histrionic deliberation. His thin fox-like muzzle twitched as if a sudden scent annoyed him.

"Scram, willya! I'm sick of your pesterin' me. Ain't you got enough brains . . ." He hesitated when he became aware of the way Lonny was looking at him. Something told him: Don't press this big goof too far, Moxie. "Leave the thinkin' to me," he ended lamely.

"If I could only get a fight before Christmas," Lonny said wistfully. "I'd like to give the kids a real one this year. You see, Moxie, las'—"

Moxie fished a handful of coins out of his pocket and bounced them on the desk. "Go buy yourself a good drunk," he grumbled.

Lonny frowned at the money as if he didn't quite understand. He didn't. "I want a fight," he explained slowly. "It seems like a long time since I had one." He turned and walked out. He didn't hear Moxie's last crack as he closed the door. The money still lay on the desk.

Big Sam had waited for Lonny at the back door; they went out together. The narrow street was a river of purple shadows, a regal background for the soft falling snow. Sam put a gloved hand over his ear and swung his dragging leg to keep up with Lonny Barrett.

"Days' so short don' seem no time at all," he observed. "Almos' night now an' not yet five o'clock."

Lonny sighed. "The year's almost gone, Sam. Funny, I can't seem to keep track no more."

They turned north on Broadway and were sucked into the swirling current of Christmas shoppers. There were wreaths in the windows, spangled red bells swinging from the lamp posts. Even the variegated signs above reminded Lonny of a gigantic Christmas tree.

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"I sure need a fight, Sam," he admitted. "I need it bad. Only a few days now, and no presents, no nothing for the kids."

Sam nodded his understanding. After a while he took a five-dollar bill out of his pocket and offered it casually.

"Here's that finn I owes you, Lonny. Near come to fergit it."

Lonny reached automatically for the bill, then his hand paused in mid-air and fell to his side.

"You don't owe me no five spot," he said.

"Sho' I does. 'Member long time back yo'—"

Lonny wagged his head. "No you don't." There was an edge to his voice that made Sam jam the money back in his pocket.

"Well, I owes *somebody* five bucks," he added weakly.

ETHEL BARRETT was smiling when Lonny came stomping in, shaking the snow off his big frame. Her eyes were swollen and a little bloodshot from crying, but Lonny didn't notice. She kissed him tenderly, and Lonny noticed that, but he thought it was just the season. Everybody was friendly and loving around Christmas time. So he lifted her clear off the floor in his strong arms and smothered her face and neck with kisses until she squealed to be released. She said breathlessly:

"You play with the boys a minute. Lonny. Dinner is ready as soon as I feed Little Joe." Little Joe was the baby.

Steve and Eddie came shouting.

"Daddy's home, daddy's home!" and flung themselves on Lonny. He permitted himself to be dragged to the floor and mauled by his five-and-seven-year-olds. And the instant Ethel was finished feeding the baby, Lonny insisted she put him on the floor so that Little Joe could get in on the fun. They would have skipped dinner entirely if Ethel hadn't driven them to the table with a broom. They scrambled boisterously away, shouting and screaming and breathless, and attacked the food like hungry wolves.

Ethel Barrett could not eat, although she went through the motions so Lonny wouldn't notice. You can't eat a dinner right after the doctor tells you the big guy who is the axis of your little universe has only one or two more months to live.

She savored that wild shouting and laughter, tried to capture forever the vision now before her. What was going to happen to the little family after Lonny went away, she did not know. For Lonny had been a good guy with a big heart and loose pockets; he would never save a dime. "Wait until I'm champ, sweetheart, an' we'll buy us a bank then." Yet when she prayed, her prayer was not concerned with herself. It was: Dear God, help me make this last Christmas of his the happiest ever. And, please God, don't let him find out.

MOXIE was still loafing in his office that night, trying to pick himself a pony, and he wasn't having much luck because he was no better at picking ponies than he was at picking champions.

He was waiting for an inspiration, reluctant to abandon the steaming warmth of his office for the snow outside, when Cap Rankin, Kid Leonetti's manager, came moping in and took the weight off his feet. Moxie brought out his guest bottle and winced to watch the contents vanish, for it took a lot of stimulant to warm Rankin. He was blue.

When Rankin finally returned the bottle to the desk, he wailed: "They ain't got no right to do this to me. It's a frame!"

"Who's framin' you?"

Well, it was a long story, but it seemed that the sports writers had framed Kid Leonetti into a benefit fight for tubercular newsboys on Christmas Eve. There would be a fifteen-hundred-buck purse for the Kid, and a hundred thousand bucks worth of publicity. The brawl was to be staged in the Dreamland Club in Harlem. And Cap Rankin was mighty sore about it.

Moxie coughed experimentally. He was chicken-breasted himself and he didn't

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like to hear about tuberculosis. But he didn't think the deal was too bad. Fifteen hundred bucks wasn't top dough, but it wasn't pure hay either. He said as much.

"No? Then you don't know the Kid," grumbled Rankin.

As if Cap didn't have enough troubles just managing a stable of brawlers, Kid Leonetti had to go and have ideals. Ideals! He had been an amateur and amateurs sometimes suffered from complexes like that. It just made a lot of extra work for Cap Rankin because the Kid wouldn't fight setups; he wanted square fights and he wouldn't put on an act with a diver.

Because he could see a title bout at the end of a short road, Cap didn't want the Kid tripped on the way up by some palooka. So far he had succeeded in setting up a string of chumps for the Kid to push over, but it was difficult to keep the Kid from getting wise. Now with this sudden battle Christmas Eve, Cap was stumped to find a suitable chunk of beef on such short notice. Did Moxie have anying on ice? Something colorful, but safe?

Moxie tugged on his nose and thought out loud. "There's the Farmer, but the Farmer's a well-known diver. The papers might crack wise about it an' then the Kid'ud be sore. Young Samson would be swell, Cap, but he's pretty good himself. Maybe the Kid couldn't take him."

Cap shook his head decisively. "No dice. I'm groomin' the Kid for the big money. A defeat will bust his string of knockouts an' set the winner ahead of him for a crack at the title. I want some has-been that can still look good."

Spider Casson came in just then. Moxie was saying: "Sorry I ain't got a heavy in stock you can use against the Kid, Cap. Believe me, pal, I'm sad. I'd like to make a buck myself."

Spider grinned. "Don't forget you still got Lonny Barrett," he kidded. "You want a has-been an' that's it."

"That bum!" said Moxie in disgust.

Cap Rankin reached for the bottle before Moxie could whisk it beyond reach. "Lonny Barrett? Is he still around?"

The spider nodded. "Sure he's around. I worked out with him today."

"Slappy as a loon," grunted Moxie. "Told the Kid he'd have to fight him before he could take on Joe Louis. The Kid acted like he believed it."

"The Kid's got no sense of humor," admitted Rankin. "But how about this stumblebum? Can the Kid take him?"

Moxie snorted. "If he can't, he'd better frame his mitts. I can lick him myself."

Rankin contemplated the empty bottle. "Say, here's an angle," he said confidentially. "Maybe we could ballyhoo this Barrett bum as makin' a comeback?" When he saw Moxie was only mildly impressed, he added: "There'll be three hundred in it for you an' Barrett."

Moxie took his feet off the desk and listened.

"Will the doctors pass him?" Rankin asked.

"If I talk fast enough they will," promised Moxie. "Boy, there is a Santa Claus!"

LONNY BARRETT thought there was a Santa Claus too when he heard about it. All the other guys in the stable figured it was a great gag. All but Big Sam. He agreed with Lonny that it was swell, but later he said to Moxie: "Yo' shouldn't done that. Lonny Barrett cain't see not'in' after two-three rounds."

"You shut your black mouth," Moxie snarled at him. "Or I'll toss you outta here."

A couple of the older sports-writers panned the match, but Moxie only sneered. "What'd those slugs want for a couple hunnerd bucks? Maybe Joe Louis?"

Lonny couldn't wait to get home and tell Ethel the good news, so he borrowed four bits from Big Sam and sent her a telegram.

SIGNED FOR FIGHT CHRISTMAS EVE. CHAMP NEXT. I LOVE YOU. LONNY

He arrived home fifteen minutes after the wire. Ethel professed delight, and she was enough of a trouper to make Lonny believe her. He was full of plans.

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"I want a turkey," he told her. "The biggest ever. An' a tree so big an' green they'll have to push the roof off. We're gonna make this one Christmas to remember."

"We'll make it one to remember," she whispered, and the way her eyes were swimming she couldn't see any better than Lonny could. "I must order some stuff," she managed, and ran out of the room.

Lonny didn't notice. He was down on his knees showing Steve and Eddie just how he was going to take care of Kid Leonetti on Christmas Eve.

. . . Doc Jacobs already knew about the fight so he wasn't surprised when Ethel Barrett telephoned.

"I wouldn't try to stop it," he advised her. "Lonny would never forgive you. It would break his heart to miss that fight."

"But he may be killed!"

The little doctor didn't think so. "It won't alter things any, Mrs. Barrett. And he'll have a little money to leave you."

"I don't care anything about the money. It is going to break his heart to lose, Doctor."

"I know," he told her. "But these next few days of hope will mean so much to him. That's about all he's got left, y'know. That tiny strand of hope."

LONNY was certainly happy and he worked as hard as a preliminary boy training for his first fight. He got the old snap into his punches and once he clipped the Spider and knocked him over the ropes. That stopped a lot of the laughing. But he hadn't really seen the Spider, he confessed afterward to Big Sam. He heard him wheezing, and just let fly at the sound.

"That's what I'll do to the Kid if my lamps commence to flicker," he confided.

The fight and Christmas for the kids were inextricably fused in Lonny's mind. When four nights before Christmas he learned that Ethel had not yet ordered the turkey, he stopped at the market on the way home with Big Sam.

"I want the biggest turkey in the city," he told the butcher.

The butcher knew about Lonny. "You got the dough to pay for it?"

Lonny glowered. "Say, what's the matter with you? Ain't my credit good? I'm makin' a comeback—"

"Yeah, I know all that stuff," said the butcher. "But it's still cash on the line."

Lonny got sore, but Big Sam tossed five bucks on the glass counter. "Here's a deposit on that tu'key. Mister Barrett he'll pay for the res' on deliv'ry." Then he steered Lonny outside.

Lonny didn't like that. "You shouldn't a-done it," he argued.

"That boy is jes' plain ig'rant, Lonny. You pay him no heed."

Lonny couldn't stay mad very long; before they had gone a block he was planning his fight again. Big Sam pulled an icicle off a window as they went past.

"I done got myself a job fo' Christmas Eve, Lonny," he confessed. "I's gonna play Santa Claus fo' my lodge in Harlem."

Lonny gasped. "Why, Sam! You gotta be in my corner that night."

"Well, I'd sho like to be, Lonny. But I promise' them kids I'd—"

"Okay, okay," Lonny said, brushing the objection aside. "You can hurry it up an' rush over to the fight. I'm gonna take Kid Leonetti in a hurry, Sam, so's I can get home to my boys. They won't go to sleep until I give 'em their present. But you got to be with me."

Big Sam nodded. "You ain't never had no fight I wa'n't in yo' corner," he said.

"Yeah, an' I ain't ever gonna have no fight without you're right there in my corner, Sam," said Lonny warmly. "You bring me luck, Sam."

They tramped through the soft snow without speaking and the mellow warmth of understanding joined them. They were friends grown old together. And Lonny could not remember when he felt so good and so contented. After a while they passed a German band playing *Heilige Nacht*. The cornet was a little sour, but it sounded swell to Lonny. It gave a poignancy to his happiness, and unconsciously he put his arm around Big Sam's shoulder.

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"Sam, tell me," Lonny said. "Honest now, Sam. You think I can take this Kid Leonetti?"

Big Sam knew about Lonny's head. He knew the buzzing had put down roots.

"Sho' you'll take him, Lonny, an' den nex' summa yo'll take the Bomber hisself," he said. "An' no matter where 'at fight take place, I'll be right dere in yo' corner, pullin' an' rootin' fo' you, Lonny."

LONNY always brought home the papers and made Ethel read the ballyhoo aloud after dinner. Since the fight was a benefit for the newsboys, the sports writers made it sound like the battle of the century, and they compared Lonny to Bob Fitzsimmons who had fought well into his forties. Lonny liked that.

She read about the Kid Leonetti, too. About his rawness and the fact that he was a little clumsy on his feet; about the beautiful Marilyn Blaine he was going to marry on New Year's Day. That made Lonny sentimental.

"You mind the day we got married, sweetheart?" he asked her, and Ethel couldn't see the type for a while. She couldn't sleep that night, either, remembering the day she and Lonny Barrett were married. So the next day she found out where Marilyn Blaine lived and called on her.

Marilyn was so young and fresh and confident that Ethel Barrett was afraid she would not understand. It's different when you're young and on the up-road and about to marry a guy who is going to be the next champion of the world. Ethel could well remember when those very days belonged to her. How could she tell this lovely girl that sometimes the guy doesn't get to be champ; that sometimes the buzzing comes into his head and grows there until he can't tell whether you're young and pretty any longer.

It was these things for which she could find no words. So she just told Lonny's simple story, and before she was half-way through it, Kid Leonetti himself walked into the room. He took Marilyn into his arms and after he kissed her, she said:

"Nick, this is Mrs. Barrett." She noticed the look on his face. "Lonny Barrett's wife," she added.

The Kid kept one arm around Marilyn's waist. "Is something the matter, Mrs. Barrett?"

Ethel's lip trembled and she didn't trust her voice. Marilyn said: "Lonny is sick."

"But the doctor passed—" began the Kid.

Ethel put a hand on her throat. "It's his . . . head," she interrupted. "A tumor. He's only a few weeks to live. The commission doctors don't know."

The Kid turned and took a slow walk around the room. "Moxie must have known," he said. "Why didn't he tell Cap Rankin?"

That made Ethel furious. "Moxie doesn't care anything about Lonny, not if there's money involved. And Rankin! What does he care? They wanted a setup for you, some poor bum that hasn't a chance!"

The Kid said very quietly, "I don't fight setups. I win my fights."

Ethel pressed her fingers against her temples and rocked from side to side in her chair.

"You win them," she cried. "Oh, you young fool! They've been feeding you pushovers, divers, and has-beens like my poor Lonny. And you don't even know it. Why you couldn't whip Lonny ten years ago, and you can't whip him now. It's old age that's going to beat him Christmas Eve, not you! He's nearly blind! He can't hardly recognize me across a room. *You* whip him!"

Marilyn came over and steadied her. "Please, Mrs. Barrett; Nick didn't know. You didn't, did you Nick?" She looked at him.

The Kid shook his head, and kept quiet for a couple of minutes. Then he took Ethel Barrett's hand.

"Tell me, ma'am—is that true? About Lonny, and that other stuff?"

She was crying now. "Lonny was just like you, Kid, when I married him. He was young and strong and game, so his

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manager boosted him into the big-time before he was ready by setting up a lot of dummies to give him a false reputation.

"Then because he had the courage of a lion, they flung him in with men who outclassed him. Nobody cared if they beat his brains soft, nobody but me waiting for him to crawl home. And that's just what they're doing to you now—building you up without experience—and you can't see it!"

"You had better call this fight off," Marilyn said.

Kid Leonetti crossed over to the window and stood staring moodily at the snow slanting before the wind. He kept his eyes on a flake until it was lost in the swirl. Without turning, he said:

"Lonny's confident he'll win this fight, isn't he?"

Ethel Barrett nodded. "Yes, and then he thinks he's going to fight for the title next summer. He doesn't know there isn't going to be any summer for him, ever."

The Kid digested that. After a pause, he said: "I can't stop the fight now, Mrs. Barrett."

Her lips tightened. "Why should you?"

Marilyn gasped. "Why, Nick! You must. I'll never—"

"I'm sorry," the Kid said firmly. "It's too late to call it off."

LONNY sat on the rubbing table in the dressing room under the arena while a handler taped his hands. The roar of the crowd filtered through the floor and filled Lonny with happiness. This was the McCoy. He wriggled his bare shoulders against the hard silk of his old purple robe, and grinned at Moxie who was standing with his thin back to the stove.

"I'm not goin' to fool with him," Lonny said. "I'm gonna end it quick."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Moxie grunted. He looked at the ceiling as the stadium shook under the cheering. "A knockout!" he said. "You're next. Let's go."

It was grand to be tramping down the sloping aisle to the ring once more. The thick smoke stung the eyes, the cheers rolled like thunder, and every few steps someone reached out and patted Lonny on the shoulder as he trotted past. He ducked agilely into the ring and pirouetted, shaking his bandaged hands clasped above his head.

Then he danced over to the ropes and shook hands with old friends at the ringside. Mickey Walker called up: "Take him, ol' timer," and Lonny winked in return. Tunney was down there, and Dempsey and Braddock, too.

He turned and trotted back to his corner, hoping to find Big Sam. Instead there was a squarehead Swede leaning against the ropes. Then Moxie piloted him into the center of the ring where Kid Leonetti was standing with the referee.

Lonny grinned. "Hiya, Kid. Feel lucky?" He put out his hand.

The Kid ignored it. "So you're the bum who's going to stop me?"

Lonny knew the symptoms: getting nervous. "Sure," he told the Kid. "In the fourth. Watch for it."

The Kid got belligerent. "Wouldn't like to stake your purse against mine you win this brawl, would you?" he challenged.

Moxie tried to shove in between them. "None of that stuff," he yelped. "We want our take."

Lonny thought a minute; then he pushed Moxie out of the way.

"You just made yourself a bet," he growled. He turned to the referee. "You heard him?"

The referee nodded. "Come on, let's get started."

Lonny listened impatiently to the instructions. Instructions for a guy with over two hundred fights under his belt! . . . Where is Big Sam?

Finally the referee pushed him toward his corner. As he trotted over, there was a rising laugh that puzzled Lonny for a minute until he saw Big Sam hobble up into the ring and elbow the Swede out of the way. Big Sam was dressed up in his Santa Claus suit and the ebony skin above the false beard shone with sweat.

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"Ah didn't have no time for to change," he panted.

Lonny gave him an affectionate tap on the chin. "You got here," he told Sam. "An' I knew you would."

The bell rang then, and Lonny moved straight out of his corner, thankful the lights were bright.

HIS eyes were pretty good for the moment. As he met the Kid in the middle, he sent over an experimental left. The Kid brushed it aside, and countered. That was okay. Lonny was checking his sense of range. He feinted, weaved in fast, and uncorked a sudden right. It connected, and the crowd roared.

The Kid is clumsy on his feet, the papers said. Keep him tripping, Lonny. Lonny tucked his chin out of the way. He could feel the ribs and stomach under his gloves.

The Kid rolled along the ropes and eluded him. For a split second, Lonny was puzzled. Then he heard the Kid off to one side, so he tore after him again. Lonny took a hard left in the face that nearly upset him, but he shook it off and plowed in close.

Don't let him get away from you again, Lonny. You're eyes can't take many lefts like that last one. He clinched and roughhoused the Kid into a neutral corner. While he pinned him there with his head and shoulders, he went to work on that well-tanned middle. He was still slugging away when the bell rang.

Lonny wanted a lot of water between rounds, but Big Sam wouldn't give it to him. Sam was so excited he had not removed his phoney whiskers. The crowd loved that. Leave it to old Lonny Barrett to put on a good show. Santa Claus in his corner.

Lonny shot off his stool at the bell and caught the Kid in his own corner trying to get set. Lonny rolled in under a snaky left and jilted him off balance against the ropes.

The Kid couldn't seem to get started. He was snorting and throwing plenty of punches, but most of them were landing on Lonny's arms where they didn't do much damage. Lonny was grateful for the Kid's wheezing. His vision was getting fuzzy, and it helped.

He began to tire in the third, and just before the bell a stiff left started the buzzing in his head going hard again. It seemed as though the roaring of the crowd was imprisoned in his skull. He had a little trouble finding his corner.

Big Sam swabbed out his mouth. "Yo' got 'em goin' Lonny boy!" he whispered in Lonny's good ear. "His manager like to worry hisself to death ova' there."

Lonny nodded grimly and chewed the mouthpiece back in place. Those lights are too hot, he told himself. Feels like a Turkish bath. He bumped his temple with the heel of his glove, but the buzzing wouldn't let up. He didn't even hear the bell. Big Sam pushed him to his feet and said:

"Go git him, boy!"

HE heard the Kid snorting in the middle of the ring. Lonny cocked his right and then sent over a long looping left. It was short, and the Kid crossed with a hard right that, although it broke over the edge of Lonny's shoulder, spilled him to one knee.

Lonny laughed, and came up. "Let's see if you can really hit, baby!" he jeered, and let go his right.

He felt it land, and the crowd howled like an echo. Let's go, Lonny! He slammed over a long left, and then a right. It's now or never, Lonny! He stood flat-footed and swung those leaden arms as fast as he could throw them. The crowd shrieked with delight and the roaring increased and grew louder until it all seemed to be echoes in Lonny's head. He couldn't feel any more.

Suddenly he could no longer see the dark bulk of Kid Leonetti and his gloves fanned empty air. The referee was holding his right arm aloft and then Big Sam was in the ring hugging him.

"Yo' done it, Lonny Boy! Yo' done it!"

Lonny grinned and tried to brush the

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fog away from his eyes. He stumbled over to where Cap Rankin was picking up Kid Leonetti. He elbowed Rankin aside and helped the Kid to his corner.

"Tough luck, Kid," Lonny said softly. "But you got lots of time yet."

Kid Leonetti smiled wryly. "Sure I have. You're a great fighter, champ. Don't forget you won yourself a bet. Merry Christmas."

As soon as the delirious Moxie hauled Lonny away to face the cameras, Cap Rankin swung on the Frisco Kid.

"Say, what'n hell's wrong with you," he sobbed. "You never even got started. Now that stumblebum'll howl for the first crack at the title. Moxie musta double-crossed me! An' if it wasn't for you throwin' away your purse on that crazy bet, I'd say you took a dive."

"You should know about things like that," Kid Leonetti snapped at Rankin. "Maybe I'm just pickin' up a little experience." He jumped out of the ring and into Marilyn's arms. She put her lips close to his ear and whispered:

"Oh, thank you, darling, thank you."

•

Big Sam wanted to change his costume before they left the Dreamland, but Lonny wouldn't hear of it. "I promised the kids I'd bring Sanny Claus home with me," he argued.

Big Sam beamed. "Who eber hear of a black Sanny Claus?" But he limped happily out into the clean, cold night with Lonny.

The air soothed Lonny's battered face like an astringent and he threw back his head and drew it into his lungs. The shadows were hiding from a pale round moon and everything was beautiful and fine. Then Lonny heard the bells, not the confusing bells that always plagued his head, but the clear, sweet bells that told what day it was. He put his arm about Sam's shoulder.

"Merry Christmas to you, Sam!"

FEAR

Fear that her pictures would be recognized haunted a promising new screen discovery in every scene. *What episode of her past could make this beautiful girl quake before the cameras? Who threatened her happiness? What had she done?*

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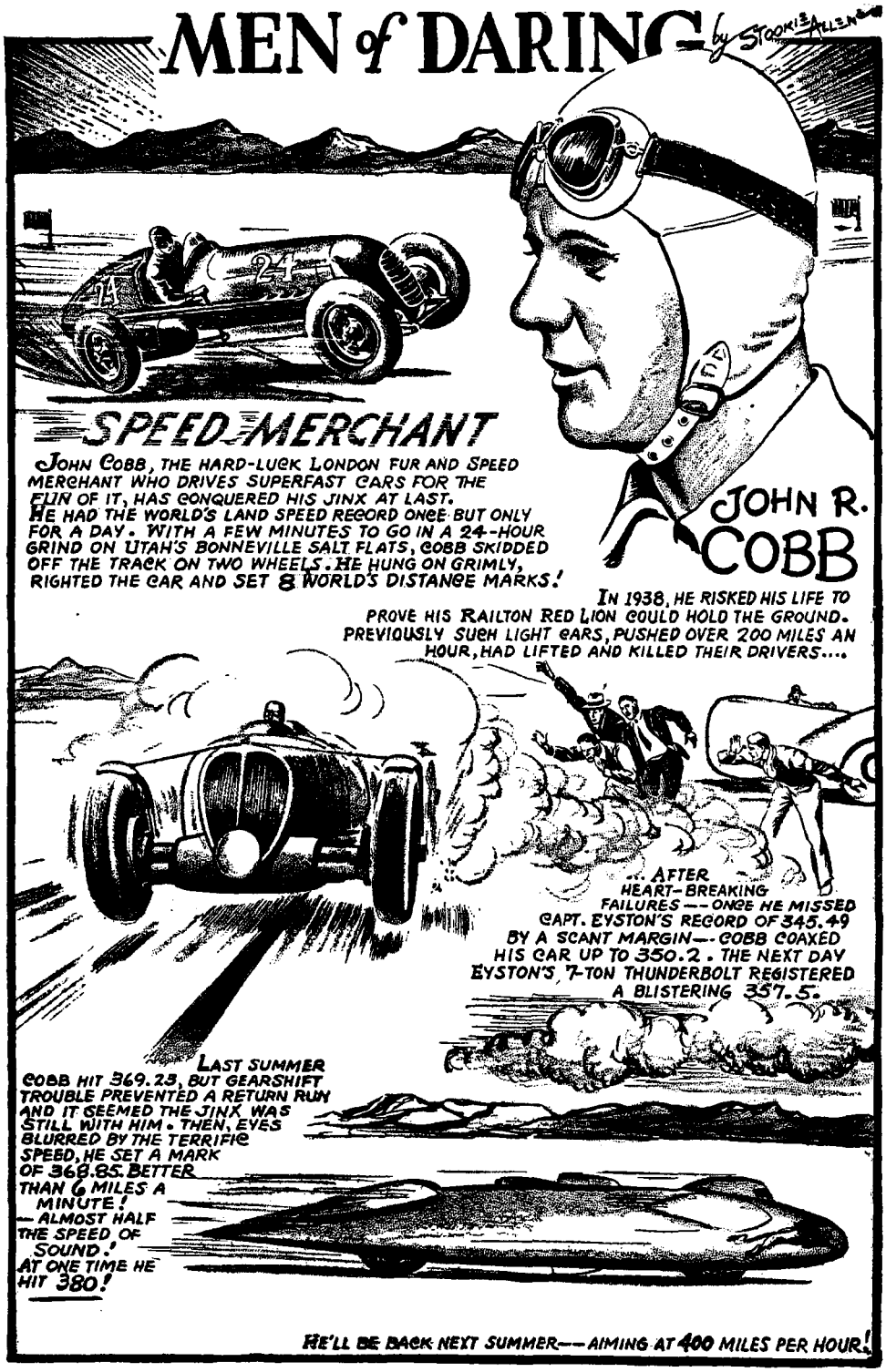
MEN of DARING
by STOOKIE ALLEN
SPEED-MERCHANT
JOHN COBB, THE HARD-LUCK LONDON FUR AND SPEED MERCHANT WHO DRIVES SUPERFAST CARS FOR THE FUN OF IT, HAS CONQUERED HIS JINX AT LAST. HE HAD THE WORLD'S LAND SPEED RECORD ONCE BUT ONLY FOR A DAY. WITH A FEW MINUTES TO GO IN A 24-HOUR GRIND ON UTAH'S BONNEVILLE SALT FLATS, COBB SKIDDED OFF THE TRACK ON TWO WHEELS. HE HUNG ON GRIMLY, Rrighted THE CAR AND SET 8 WORLD'S DISTANCE MARKS!
JOHN R. COBB
IN 1938, HE RISKED HIS LIFE TO PROVE HIS RAILTON RED LION COULD HOLD THE GROUND. PREVIOUSLY SUCH LIGHT CARS, PUSHED OVER 200 MILES AN HOUR, HAD LIFTED AND KILLED THEIR DRIVERS....
... AFTER HEART-BREAKING FAILURES — ONCE HE MISSED CAPT. EYSTON'S RECORD OF 345.49 BY A SCANT MARGIN — COBB COAXED HIS CAR UP TO 350.2. THE NEXT DAY EYSTON'S 7-TON THUNDERBOLT REGISTERED A BLISTERING 357.5.
LAST SUMMER COBB HIT 369.23, BUT GEARSHIFT TROUBLE PREVENTED A RETURN RUN AND IT SEEMED THE JINX WAS STILL WITH HIM. THEN, EYES BLURRED BY THE TERRIFIC SPEED, HE SET A MARK OF 368.85. BETTER THAN 6 MILES A MINUTE! — ALMOST HALF THE SPEED OF SOUND! AT ONE TIME HE HIT 380!
HE'LL BE BACK NEXT SUMMER — AIMING AT 400 MILES PER HOUR!

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Forever England

Through cowardice and treachery and red death he strode, shoulder to shoulder with the great Lawrence of Arabia. And when his final magnificent fight was over, the last of the Wiltons inherited that corner of a foreign field that was—Forever England!

By PHILIP KETCHUM

Author of "Course of Empire," "England Farewell," etc.

I

SOMETIMES in the night, during a long trek across the desert, James Wilton could close his eyes and call back to his mind visions of the green hills of England, of the broad meadows which sloped down toward the tree-bordered river Avon, of the pattern of moonlight across the curving High Street at Oxford.

Sometimes it would seem to him that he could feel the spattering of rain against his face or sense the cool, chilly embrace of an early fog, coming at evening.

And sometimes when he was very tired, his imagination could make those pictures so real that a sudden burst of song from the Bedouin guard would startle him as sharply as a slap in the face.

He usually tried to keep himself from slipping off that way; for always, when he came out of it, his spirits were weighed down by a depression which lingered with him for a long time. He couldn't quite understand the reason for it, and he often wondered whether any of the other men out here had the same experience and whether they had been able to analyze it.

Tonight, try as he would, he couldn't keep his thoughts from England.

Weariness, he knew, was partially responsible for it. He had hardly been out of the saddle for sixty hours and the past three days had been almost unbearably hot.

Complete Novelet of Bretwalda, The Magic Axe

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Even Shereef Tabari and the Bedouins were showing the strain of the long ride. There hadn't been any singing for hours. Wilton closed his eyes, drew a long, slow breath. He tried to shake off the thoughts which were crowding in on him.

"Look, *sidi,* on yonder hill!" Tabari cried suddenly.

James Wilton straightened in the saddle; stared the way Tabari was pointing. Off to the left, perhaps a mile distant, was a body of mounted men. The minute figures were clearly outlined against the gray background of the sky.

"Turks," said Tabari, and the word was almost an epithet.

WILTON nodded. They were nearing the fringe of the desert and he had half expected to run into a Turkish patrol. This region was alive with them.

Their main duty, he knew, was to protect the railroad and the highway bridges on the line between Damascus and Amman, where the main force of the Turkish army was quartered; but anxious to capture Lawrence and to earn the reward offered for his capture by the Germans, they often ventured out into the desert, hoping to cross his trail.

As the last of the figures disappeared over the hill, Tabari leaned forward in his saddle. "They are not many, *sidi.* They did not see us. We could easily overtake them."

There was an eager note in the young *shereef's* voice. Wilton could understand it. Tabari's hatred of the Turk was like a consuming flame.

He had been with King Hussein at Mecca the year before and had taken part in that first struggle with the Turks. Since then he had ridden with Emir Feisal and with Lawrence on many a raid. He knew not the meaning of fear. Wilton had the feeling that Tabari would not have hesitated to charge that patrol alone.

"We could easily overtake them," Tabari said again.

Wilton shook his head. "The message we bear from Sidi Lawrence is more important than the destruction of a Turkish patrol, Tabari. It may bring about the destruction of the whole Turkish army."

Tabari, scowled, reached up and stroked his beard.

"We ride on," said Wilton.

Tabari shrugged but made no comment, though he looked regretfully to the left.

They continued on toward the west. This was no road or trail they were following, for the ever-shifting desert sand blotted out the marks of their passing just as it obliterated the tracks of any who had gone before them.

More than a hundred and fifty miles behind them lay the oasis of Azarak where Wilton had met Lawrence. Somewhere in the valley ahead was Ramleh where General Allenby's headquarters were now located.

"Another patrol, *sidi!*" cried one of the Bedouins.

Wilton's eyes swept the country ahead and then turned to the rear. This patrol had come up behind them; it was lighter now, and they had been seen. A rifle bullet screamed a warning over his head.

Tabari had swung around and was firing back at the Turks. His dark face glowed with excitement.

"Tabari!" Wilton called. "After me!"

He shook out the reins of his horse, leaned forward over the saddle, looked back. After a momentary hesitation, Tabari and the other Bedouins rode after him, still screaming their defiance.

IT WAS mid-day before James Wilton reached General Allenby's headquarters in Ramleh. When he dismounted from the saddle he was so stiff that he could hardly stand erect.

The sentries near the general's tent looked at him curiously. Wilton wondered if any of them could guess that he was an Englishman. He didn't look like one, he knew. His face had been tanned by the wind and sun until it was almost black; he hadn't shaved for more than a year; and he wore the clothing of an Arabian *shereef.*

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A white silk *kuffieh* was held in place on his head by an *agal* of two black, woolen cords. A long camel's-hair robe reached from his broad shoulders to the ground. Around his waist he wore a gold-brocaded belt from which hung a short curved sword.

"I will care for your horse, *sidi,*" Tabari offered.

Wilton nodded. "And rest, Tabari, for we must ride at dusk."

The Arab's teeth flashed in a smile. He caught the reins of Wilton's horse and turned away.

General Allenby appeared suddenly in the doorway of his tent. He glanced over at Wilton, called him by name; then asked anxiously, "Did you see him?"

Wilton lifted his arm in a salute: not a very correct salute. His work as a member of the Near East Intelligence Corps had kept him out in the desert almost continually during the past year. He had had little contact with routine army life.

"Yes sir," he answered. "I saw him two nights ago."

Allenby said, "Come on in," and backed into the tent.

Wilton followed him, stood to one side as two staff officers left, and a faint smile came to his lips as he noted the same curious expressions on their faces as he had seen on the faces of the sentries.

General Allenby indicated a camp chair. "Sit down, Captain," he suggested. "You made a quick trip. You must be tired. I'm anxious to know whether Lawrence has heard from the *shereef* of the Ruallas."

"He has not heard from him," Wilton answered. "But he sent me with this message. *With or without the Ruallas, Lawrence will begin operations near Deraa on the sixteenth.*"

Allenby's eyes narrowed. He studied Wilton for a moment, then asked abruptly, "Do you know our plan?"

Wilton nodded. He knew the plan which Lawrence and Allenby had worked out and the daring of it thrilled him. His mind checked over the whole picture of the near-Eastern situation as it had developed since the outbreak of the war.

When Turkey had been pulled into the struggle as an ally of Germany, the Turks had counted on throwing a million armed men into the struggle, fully half of whom would have been Arabs. And Germany had counted on the Turks to whip the Moslem people into the frenzy of a "Holy War."

Things hadn't worked out that way, however. On June ninth, 1916, Grand Shereef Hussein had denounced his masters, the Turks, and had led the tribes of Arabia against Mecca, Jeddah, and Medina, then in Turkish hands.

This revolt, at first successful, had bogged down and might have faded entirely had it not been for a young Briton named Lawrence, who, as a member of the Near East Intelligence Corps, went into Arabia for the express purpose of keeping it alive.

How well Lawrence had succeeded the Turks knew to their sorrow. He had banded together the desert tribes, had raided and taken one town after another.

A British Expeditionary force shortly after the outset of the war had freed Egypt of the Turks and had pushed up into Palestine; and now, in close contact with Lawrence, the nominal head of the Arabs, was driving on toward Syria.

Thus the Turks had been able to furnish few soldiers for the struggle in Europe. Indeed, they were sore pressed to hold the Ottoman Empire together; and now, in September of 1918, were making a desperate attempt to stop the drive of the British.

IT WAS possible that they might do it, Wilton knew. On the western front, in France, Ludendorff was making another stab at Paris and several divisions of Allenby's men had been called home to bolster up the defense.

Yet in spite of this, Lawrence and Allenby had worked out a plan, which, if successful, might completely break the Turkish grip on Arabia.

"You know that we mean to attack Deraa and Damascus?" Allenby asked.

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"I know that," Wilton admitted, "and I know that the Turks are sure that your army is concentrated in the valley of the Jordan and that your objective is Amman. How you have managed to fool them I couldn't say."

Allenby smiled. "I gave them something to look at. We have shifted all our camel-hospitals to the Jordan valley. We have brought up thousands of wornout tents from Egypt and set them up in the meadows. We have placed hundreds of captured cannon around the camp.

"We have thrown ten thousand horse blankets over bushes and have tied them up to look like horse lines. We have painted a picture in the valley of the Jordan, a picture of an army which doesn't exist."

Wilton caught his breath. "You mean—just that?"

"There are a few regiments there."

"But if the Turks guessed—"

"The Turks could do to me what I plan doing to them. They could sweep in around behind me, cut off my lines of communication, my line of supplies."

Wilton knew that Allenby and Lawrence planned to do just that to the Turks. Lawrence had already left Azarak and was heading for Deraa, a railroad junction south of Damascus and between Damascus and Amman where the Turkish army lay watching the picture Allenby had painted for them.

It was Lawrence's part in the plan to cut all lines of communication between that army and the force in Damascus. Allenby, then, would lead the British toward Damascus.

Once Damascus was in British hands, the Turkish army to the south would be helpless: entirely surrounded, wholly cut off from supplies.

"I had hoped," said Allenby, "that you would bring me word that Lawrence had heard from the Rualla tribe. I know that he counts on them in the engagement ahead."

Wilton straightened. "I bring you word to go ahead. With or without the Ruallas, Lawrence will not fail you."

"Remarkable chap, Lawrence," Allenby nodded. "You were with him before the war, weren't you?"

"I was a member of the same archaeological expedition. That's where I learned what I know of Arabia, its language and customs."

II

THE drumming roar of an airplane's motor sounded overhead. Allenby listened for a moment, then said, "One of the new Handley-Page planes. I've been able to get several. You are going back to meet Lawrence?"

"Tonight," Wilton answered.

"Tell him to go ahead as we planned. The railroad lines must be cut. No word of what we are doing must get through to the Turks and if their army starts back toward Damascus, it must be stopped."

Wilton nodded. He saluted Allenby, a little better this time; shook hands with him and declined a proffer of hospitality. "Shereef Tabari and some of the Bedouins came with me," he said to the general. "I will rest with them until night and then leave to join Lawrence."

Allenby walked with him through the doorway of the tent, summoned a staff officer who was waiting outside and then turned back.

Wilton moved down the company street. There did not seem to be many men quartered here in Ramleh. He wondered where the main body of Allenby's force had been sent, whether it could already be heading toward Deraa and Damascus.

A dozen paces from General Allenby's tent, Wilton came upon a group of men gathered around an officer who wore on his cap the insignia of the Royal Air Force. The airman's back was toward Wilton; but something in the way the man stood arrested his attention.

The man was tall and broad of shoulder and there was a strut in every line of his figure. His voice was loud and it carried easily to Wilton's ears.

"There's nothing to it," the aviator was saying. "Let this man Lawrence plant

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his tulips. I'll take a load of eggs up in that crate I brought in here and in half a day blast away ten times as many bridges."

Several of the men in the group managed a polite laugh—though it seemed to Wilton that their attitudes had perceptibly cooled.

"I guess you didn't get out here soon enough," someone suggested.

James Wilton moved around so that he could see the airman's face. It was a bold handsome face with strong lines. The man's mouth was broad and was smiling. If there had been an insult in that last statement he didn't seem to have recognized it.

"Guess that's right," he nodded. And then, "Say, where'll I find Allenby?"

Wilton moved forward. He said sharply "Major Scott, I'd like to see you for a minute."

THE aviator whirled around to face him and for a moment there was no recognition in his eyes. Then Wilton could sense the sudden rigidity which swept over him and he saw Scott moisten his lips with his tongue. Those lips formed syllables of Wilton's name but no sound came from his throat.

Wilton took Scott's arm and led him several paces away from the group which had gathered around him. He said, "Yes, I'm James Wilton, Harold's brother."

Scott's breath was coming heavily. There was a note of desperation in his voice as he said, "I—I wanted to explain to you about Harold. I thought he was dead. Honestly I did. I thought—"

"He is dead," Wilton said flatly. "He died in a plane shot down in France more than two years ago. He and another plane in his squadron were separated from the rest of the flight in the fog of an early dawn. They ran into a bunch of German planes. Harold's companion turned and ran and left Harold to face them alone. He got three of the Boches at that before they got him. You were the one who ran, Scott."

Scott's hands were gripped together. He said swiftly, "No, Wilton. No. It wasn't that way at all. I—"

"Harold's plane fell behind the French lines," Wilton said quietly. "A French officer talked to him before he died. I had the story from him. I can understand why you are still alive. *He who fights and runs away—*"

There was perspiration on Scott's forehead and a pain which Wilton could almost feel showed in the man's eyes.

A cold rage which had long been bottled up took possession of Wilton. He wanted to smash his fist into the handsome face of this braggart who had fled to safety and who had left his brother to face death alone.

Instead he heard himself saying, "I don't know how you've managed to get by this far, Scott, but if you thought to find the fighting out here any safer than in France, you're wrong. If we didn't need your plane I'd go to Allenby with what I know about you. Instead, I'm going to be still about it—as long as you carry out whatever orders he gives you. Do you understand?"

Scott didn't make any answer but after a moment he turned and walked away, moving a little unsteadily up the company street.

Wilton watched him for a while, then turned and moved on, looking for the place where Tobari had made his camp.

A HAND, lightly shaking his shoulder, aroused Wilton from a deep slumber and he sat up to hear Tabari saying, "One has come for you, *sidi,* with word that Lord Allenby wishes to see you again."

Wilton got to his feet, stretched. His eyes were tired and the muscles of his back still ached. It had grown dark and nearby there was a fire. Several of the Bedouins were squatting around it and the smell of roast mutton reached to where Wilton was standing.

Tabari moved over to the fire and returned with some of the food, baked desert

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bread, mutton, and the inevitable dates. Wilton sat cross-legged and ate. He said to Tabari, "We must ride tonight as soon as I have seen Allenby."

"Wilton!" called a voice from the shadows to one side. "Wilton! By Jove! I would never have recognized you."

Wilton got to his feet, stared in the direction from which the voice had come. A short, rather heavy-set British officer was moving forward, one hand outstretched. The man was young and had a round, chubby face and was grinning.

"Cavanaugh!" Wilton gasped.

The young man seized his hand and pumped it up and down. "You and Lawrence," he said enthusiastically. "That's all I've heard about since I got out here. Wilton and Lawrence, the leaders of the Arabs. How did you ever do it, man?"

Wilton shook his head. "I didn't do it, Cavanaugh. Lawrence is the man who is responsible for all that has happened; and like a dozen other officers, I have only been helping him as I could."

"You are too modest," Cavanaugh claimed. "By Jove, it's good to see you."

Wilton felt a little embarrassed. He was glad to see Cavanaugh but he had never thought very much of the man. For Helen's sake he had tried to be nice to him; but there was a weakness in the girl's brother which kept cropping out.

Cavanaugh was an inveterate gambler, a heavy drinker. Only his father's high position and influence had kept him from disgrace, time and time again. Wilton guessed that the young man had been sent out here as he had been transferred to other places—to give him a new chance.

"Tell me about Lawrence," Cavanaugh demanded. "Where is he?"

Wilton shrugged his shoulders. "One never knows. He's likely to turn up any place."

"At Damascus?"

Wilton frowned, shrugged his shoulders again.

"I can't figure out what Allenby's got in his mind," Cavanaugh said slowly. "It's been whispered about that he intends to attack at Deraa and Damascus, but he doesn't dare try that for he hasn't enough men to protect Jerusalem if he brings a force north. The Turks could swing around behind him or could march back this way and defeat him in a battle."

"I've got to go see Allenby," Wilton mentioned. "Let's walk that way. How's your sister, Helen?"

"She's here," Cavanaugh answered.

"Here?" Wilton gasped.

"With a Red Cross unit."

Wilton stared at the man in amazement. He couldn't believe that he had heard him correctly. A thrill of excitement swept over his body and made him feel suddenly very weak.

Cavanaugh laughed. "I thought that would get you. I always had a notion that you and Helen were rather fond of each other. Yes, she's here, Wilton. And the hospital's over that way."

Cavanaugh pointed to the left with his arm. Wilton bit his lips. His breath was coming very fast and he could feel his heart thumping against the walls of his chest.

"Come on," Cavanaugh insisted. "You said you had to see Allenby."

GENERAL Allenby was with a staff officer when Wilton reported at his tent. He was saying, "You will arrest him at once. The court martial will be deferred until after this campaign is over."

The staff officer saluted, swung around and marched out of the tent.

Allenby looked up at Wilton. "I have just received definite information indicating which of my staff officers has been acting as a spy for the Turks," he said slowly. "I have ordered his arrest. We knew that there was a leak somewhere. That is why Lawrence and I have been so close about our plans."

Wilton nodded. "You wanted to see me?"

"I did. Lawrence is always asking for more planes. He says that his Arabs feel that they need planes because the Turks

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have them. We've sent him what planes we could and it has occurred to me that perhaps he could make use of one of the Handley-Pages. A big bomber like that ought to impress the tribes. Besides, it should be useful to Lawrence around Deraa.

"Unfortunately there isn't a pilot here who knows the country up that way. I want you to take the observer's place in the plane and direct the pilot to Lawrence's camp."

Wilton frowned. "What pilot are you sending?"

"A man named Scott who just arrived here today. Know him!"

"Yes, I know him," Wilton answered slowly.

Something in his voice caught Allenby's attention, but Wilton's face was expressionless.

"He will leave at dawn," Allenby continued. "He does not know where he is going. I have told him that he will take his orders from you."

Wilton's lips tightened. He had little liking for this assignment, even though it would bring him to Lawrence's side much sooner than he had anticipated.

Allenby stood up. "I'm counting on you and Lawrence," he said soberly. "I can't possibly impress upon you how important this campaign is. If we are successful, the hold of the Turk on Arabia will be broken and the Kaiser's dream of a *Mittel-Europa* empire will be crushed. If we fail the war may be prolonged for years, may even be lost. I feel that sincerely. The future destiny of the world will ride with you and Lawrence during the next few days."

Something in Allenby's tone of voice stabbed through Wilton's body with the keenness of a knife. He knew the importance of this campaign, how disastrous it would be for the allies if Turkey and Germany controlled Arabia and the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

Allenby put out his hand. "My regards to Lawrence. Tell him that I will see him in Damascus."

III

JAMES WILTON turned away, stepped from the tent. He had half expected to find Arthur Cavanaugh waiting for him; but Cavanaugh was not in sight. Tabari came forward, touched his arm. "The horses are waiting, *sidi*."

Wilton shook his head. "I cannot ride with you, Tabari. Lord Allenby is sending one of the giant planes to Sidi Lawrence. I must go along to point out the way. It is the will of Allah."

The Arab bowed. "And your servants?"

"You will join me near Deraa, Tabari. The hour for the final blow has come."

Tabari sucked in a long, slow breath. "We are ready," he muttered almost to himself. "We are ready."

James Wilton accompanied Tabari to where the other Bedouins waited. He spoke to them for a moment, then bade them farewell and took his own horse and led it back to the place where their camp had been. There he tied his horse to a date palm; and after that he moved off in the direction of the hospital established by the Red Cross unit.

At his request, an orderly entered the hospital tent to summon Helen Cavanaugh.

While he waited, Wilton was conscious of a growing excitement and of an embarrassment which made him feel a little foolish and a little afraid. He touched a hand to his beard and stared down at his strange costume; and he told himself that in the three years which had passed since he had seen Helen, many things could have happened.

Then quite suddenly a tall slender figure in a white nurse's uniform appeared in the hospital door; hesitated a moment, and stepped outside.

The faint light from a nearby fire touched the girl's face, giving a sudden reality to the vision which Wilton had carried in his heart for so many years. An impulse came to Wilton to rush forward and take Helen in his arms, but he was powerless to move. He couldn't do a thing but stand there and look at

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her and try to swallow the choking feeling in his throat.

"Jim," said the girl. "Jim." And then she was hurrying forward, almost stumbling. As she reached him her arms lifted up and went around his shoulders in an embrace as natural as if they had never been apart.

For a long time, then, they just stood there; and the thought came to Wilton that this was the strangest of all strange things that had ever happened to him—and that it was at the same time the most natural thing in the world. It was altogether right that Helen should be so close to him at this moment. She was trembling a little, and his arms tightened instinctively. The deep fragrance of her hair almost shut everything else out of his consciousness.

Almost—not quite. He saw the orderly who had gone after the girl show up at the door, stare at them and back away.

But then Helen pushed her head back and looked up into Wilton's face; and he could see only that there were tears in her eyes.

"I never thought I'd like you—with a beard," she said, a little unsteadily.

Wilton laughed. He bent over and kissed her on the lips. After a moment she drew away from him, but still clung to one arm.

"It's you, isn't it?" she whispered. "It's really you. . . . I can get away for a while, Jim. Where can we talk?"

WILTON led her away from the circle of light made by the fire and found a place near a grove of palm trees not too far away. They sat on the ground there, close to each other; he took her hand and held it.

"I never thought that this could happen," he said. "That I should meet you here like this—after all the changes that three years have brought, the other changes I was afraid they might bring—Tell me I'm not dreaming."

"It isn't a dream, Jim—and I haven't changed."

His hand closed more tightly about hers. "I know that, now. And it makes everything else seem quite small, unimportant."

Helen touched his arm. "Tell me about yourself. Tell me what you have been doing. I have heard, of course, about you and Lawrence, but—just talk, Jim."

"Tell me first about yourself. How did you happen to come down here?"

"Someone had to come. Besides, father thought that I—that I might be able to help Arthur. Something happened in France. I don't know what it was but father suddenly arranged to have Arthur sent down here. I—I think he's straightened up, Jim. He's not bad at heart. He's just—weak."

Wilton frowned. There had never been any misunderstandings between him and Helen on Arthur's account. They had faced the situation frankly. He pushed away his thoughts of Arthur.

"But what of you? What have you been doing?"

"Serving with the Red Cross. First in France and now here. I don't want to talk about it, Jim. If I let myself talk about it, think about it, I'd go crazy. I want to hear about you."

WILTON began to talk, slowly at first and almost wholly of Lawrence. He told of how Lawrence had been turned down when he had tried to join the army in England, and later had been accepted by the Near East Intelligence Corps, mainly because of his knowledge of Arabia.

And the rest of the story—Lawrence's two-week furlough, from which he had never come back; his alliance with Emir Feisal, and his work in welding the tribal units of Arabia into a marauding army to harass the Turks.

"I am only one of those helping him," Wilton told Helen. "There are dozens of us who, because of our knowledge of Arabia, have been pulled in to do our part."

"You live with the tribes?"

"Live with them, sleep with them, dress

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as they do, eat their food, almost think as an Arab. The Bedouin tribes, the desert people, on whom Lawrence depends the most, are very primitive. They—you remember that old battle-axe which hung over the mantel at home?"

Helen nodded. "I remember it."

"Well, I have it with me. I carry it when we ride. Most of the Bedouins, in addition to rifles and pistols, carry swords or spears or axes, medieval weapons such as that one. And *Bretwalda* has helped to lift me some in their estimation.

"It's an enormous axe, very heavy—too heavy for others to swing. The thought that I can wield it means something to the Bedouin."

"Bretwalda?" Helen repeated.

Wilton nodded.

"That's the name of the old axe. It's cut in the head just above the blade. The word means Ruler of Britain. It was the custom in the old days to name weapons."

The girl's cool hand smoothed back Wilton's hair. "Let's talk no more of war," he heard her whisper. "I must go back to the hospital in a minute. I've already been away too long."

Wilton drew a slow breath. He said, "Tell me of England, Helen. Are the lights on the Thames just the same? Was last spring as early and as beautiful? It seems as if I have been away for a lifetime. Sometimes I wonder—"

"Wonder what, dear?"

Wilton shook his head. "It doesn't matter. All that matters is this interlude in a world that has gone crazy."

From the direction of the camp some man shouted an order and a moment later the clarion call of a bugle shattered the stillness of the night. Wilton closed his ears to those sounds. He looked up into the girl's face, vague and shadowy just above his head.

He thought that she was smiling. She said, "I went up to Oxford the last time I was in England, Jim. I stood on that corner under the great tree where centuries ago we used to meet. Nothing seemed to have changed. The old stone house across the street—"

Wilton closed his eyes and listened By some strange magic Helen's voice was bringing him a feeling of contentment and peace. He had the wish that this night might never end—that its enchantment might stay with him forever.

Then drumming through the walls of his consciousness came the sound of marching feet.

IV

THE Handley-Page circled above the village of Umtaiye, thirteen miles south-east of Deraa. James Wilton leaned over the edge of the observer's cockpit. He could make out a great body of horsemen at one side of the village; and near them another troop mounted on racing camels. He was sure that these were Lawrence's men.

Scott swung around, cut the motors. "Is this it?" he shouted. "Where do we land?"

"This is it," Wilton called back. "Pick out your own landing field."

The plane sank lower and circled the village again. Scott cut in the motors and started to climb. He screamed something at Wilton and though Wilton couldn't catch all of it he thought that the man said, "It's impossible to land here. The ground's too rough."

Wilton drew a pistol from his belt. He loosened the strap around his waist, stood up, leaned against the rushing air and tapped Scott on the shoulder. Scott turned, saw the pistol in his hand.

Wilton motioned to the ground, then swung the pistol so that Scott could see straight down the barrel. What he meant was unmistakable.

Again Scott cut the motor. "We'll crack up," he screamed. "There isn't a chance to land down there. I tell you—"

Wilton hadn't enjoyed this ride with Scott. All the way over here from Ramleh the sight of the man's broad back had reminded him of his brother and of his brother's death.

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"I said land," he grated. "And I meant just that. Put this kite on the ground."

Scott turned back to the controls. The plane had started down again. It circled back toward the village. Wilton sat back and re-fastened the strap around his waist. He put away his gun, braced himself against the shock of a landing.

The plane bumped against the earth, bounced up into the air, rocked precariously and then jolted down again. After another series of bumps it came to a stop.

Wilton swung over the side to the ground. He looked up at Scott and said bluntly, "I told you this wasn't like flying in France. We haven't had much time to level off landing fields. Now try pulling yourself together. These men who are riding up are my friends. I'd hate them to see the color of your skin."

Scott had taken off his helmet. He was perspiring and he wouldn't meet Wilton's stare. Wilton turned away from him.

A dozen or more Bedouins were riding toward the plane and with them was one man, shorter than the others, clean-shaven. His *kuffieh* was of gold-embroidered white silk and his long dark cloak was laced with a pattern in silver thread.

THIS was Lawrence, the man so puny in size that the British army had rejected him, the man who had taken a furlough from another service and stayed away to raise and to head the greatest Arabian army since the time of Saladin

"I was in a hurry to get back," Wilton said as Lawrence and the Bedouins rode up.

"Allenby?" Lawrence asked.

"He is ready."

Lawrence nodded and stared off toward the valley through which ran the highway and the railroad. "We must get on with our part of the work," Wilton heard him mutter.

Scott clambered from the plane and Wilton introduced him to Lawrence. Lawrence nodded. "German fliers sent down to help the Turks have owned the air around here," he said to Scott. "You'll find plenty to do."

Even as he spoke the throbbing of an airplane's motor could be heard and over the western horizon appeared two dark-winged ships. Scott looked at Lawrence and then at Wilton. He turned back to his plane. "Spin the prop for me, will you, Wilton?" he asked.

Wilton lifted the axe he had brought with him from the plane. He walked around to the prop and at Scott's signay, spun it. The motor caught; he backed away and watched Scott take off.

The Handley-Page circled around and around, fighting for altitude, then finally straightened out and made for the two German planes. The German planes had turned and were scooting away and the Handley-Page followed them over the horizon.

"I'm glad to get that ship," Lawrence remarked. "We need a few more."

Wilton said nothing, wondering whether he would ever see Scott again. He didn't think it likely. After he was out of sight, Wilton felt, Scott would probably turn south and head out of the danger zone. Landing in some British-controlled city he could blame everything on engine trouble.

One of the Bedouins brought Wilton a horse and gazed admiringly at the great axe in Wilton's hand. He pointed to the single, blood-red jewel in the head of the axe. It had caught the rays of the sun. It sparkled as if it were alive.

Wilton stared down at it. According to the legend of the axe which he had heard from his father, there had once been an even dozen jewels such as that left in the axe *Bretwalda;* but one by one they had been lost.

Another phase of the legend came to his mind. The inscriptions on the long axe handle were supposed to carry a motto which promised to the man who swung the axe *a great joy and a great sorrow, a great victory and a great defeat.*

"We will ride for Deraa," Lawrence

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said to him. "North of there we will strike our first blow. I have brought along a good supply of tulips."

Several of the Bedouins laughed. A tulip, as all of them knew, was Lawrence's term for a bomb. His tulips had been his most effective weapon in his campaign against the Turks.

Wilton swung into the saddle and at an order from Lawrence the Bedouin army rode north.

THE railroad which reached from Constantinople through Syria and Palestine, and then on down through the Hedjaz country to Medina, was the life-line of the Turkish army.

That lower part of Arabia they could control no longer, for the Hedjaz tribes had driven them out of all centers excepting Medina. But northern Palestine and Syria were still under Turkish domination. There were Turkish garrisons in every large town and all along the railroads there were outposts to patrol the tracks.

Down that railroad to the Fourth Turkish Army, now located mainly at Amman, went trainloads of supplies and ammunition and new troops as they were needed.

Above Amman, Palestine and Syria belonged to the Turks. And it was above Amman that Lawrence meant to strike. His job it was to cut that Turkish lifeline and to see that it stayed cut while Allenby pushed northward toward Damascus, around the flank of the Turkish army.

At a point several kilos above Deraa, Lawrence and his men came out of the foothills and within sight of the railroad. On up a little way was a bridge over a deep ravine and near it were several huts, marking the quarters of the outpost left to guard the bridge.

"A good place to begin," said Lawrence, waving one hand above his head.

No other order was needed. Wild, screaming yells burst from the throats of the Bedouins as they charged forward —and Wilton found himself screaming with the rest.

A new and strange excitement surged through his veins. This raid, he could feel, was different from the others in which he had taken part. Most of all that had gone before had been in reality an annoying, guerrilla warfare, designed to worry and harass the Turks; but this time there was a sober design in their raid.

On other occasions they had perhaps wiped out an outpost and blown up a bridge and a few miles of track which the Turks had quickly repaired. This time they had to see that the line stayed cut and that the highway, too, was blocked.

So sudden and so unexpected was that attack of Lawrence's men that the Turks, although almost equal to them in number, had no chance. A scattering volley of rifle fire echoed across the valley and here and there a Bedouin horse reared up and screamed in terror.

Then the two forces came together.

Guns were discarded now by the Arabs and glistening swords flashed in the sunlight. The dark and swarthy face of one of the Turks loomed up at Wilton's side.

He twisted his pistol that way, pressed the trigger but did not feel the gun's recoil. A clubbed rifle swung at his head. He ducked it and threw his pistol directly into the Turk's face. A Bedouin slipped between them and a sword rose and fell. The Turks slid screaming to the ground.

As swiftly as it had started, the fighting was over. Wilton wiped a hand over his brow, stared up the track. There, at the far end of the bridge, Lawrence was already planting his tulips, and nearer at hand several of the Bedouins had dismounted and with long staffs were prying loose the steel rails of the track.

As fast as a rail was loosened, three men would grasp it, carry it to the ravine's edge, and slide it into the chasm below.

Lawrence finished planting his tulips and carrying the detonator box, hurried away from the bridge and to a point of safety. The Bedouins drew aside to watch the explosion. Lawrence pushed in the plunger; and with a roar which was deafening to the ears, the bridge buckled,

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reared up into the air and then sagged down into the ravine, a broken, useless thing.

"So much for a beginning," Lawrence muttered.

An airplane swooped down from overhead and Wilton saw with some surprise that it was the Handley-Page. Scott waved to them from the cockpit, swung the plane around. Half a mile down the track he started dropping bombs. Several of them scored direct hits.

"Yes, a good beginning," Lawrence nodded. "But only that."

THAT day and the next two were days of almost continual riding, of almost continual fighting. Just above Deraa they ran into a Kurdish patrol and below Deraa they had a brush with another.

Lawrence, Wilton and a few others turned aside to Mezerib where they joined one of the Arab tribes Lawrence had started that way, early in the morning. At Mezerib they succeeded in cutting the telegraph wire which stretched down from Constantinople.

Then, turning back toward Nasib, they were almost captured by a troop of Turkish cavalry out on patrol duty.

Such was the first day and the next two were like it. At a score of places along twenty miles of the track, the Bedouins struck. At a score of places they overpowered the Turkish patrols and tore up the track.

Reënforcements sent down from Damascus and up from Amman to put down what the Turks considered only some local rebellious tribe, found themselves facing an emergency with which they couldn't cope. While they pursued one band of Arabs through the foothills, three other groups would strike the line at widely separated spots.

Soldiers set to work to repair the track fell victim to distant and well hidden snipers. By the third day the lifeline of the Turkish army was so effectively cut that it would have taken a week of constant work to put it into condition.

In the evening of the third day Lawrence drew Wilton aside and led him to an outcropping of rock on Mount Tell Ara, near where his men had made their camp. The sky was clear that night, and the stars seemed so close that Wilton had the feeling he could almost reach up and touch them.

He was tired but hardly aware of it; and Lawrence showed his weariness not at all.

"We have done our part thus far with very little trouble," Lawrence said to him. "The reserves which have been sent up from the south haven't bothered us much but they have greatly weakened the Turk. Tomorrow is the nineteenth, the day Allenby has named to start his march toward Deraa and Damascus. If he moves swiftly enough the Turkish army will be trapped."

"But if they have guessed what he plans—"

Lawrence frowned. "I have been worrying about that. If the Turkish army at Amman should start this way within the next two days we would have to change our plans. I want you to fly to Ramleh tomorrow. I want you to tell Allenby what we have done.

"Tell him to push forward with all possible speed. And on your way I want you to fly high over Amman and see what you can observe."

Wilton's first inclination was to beg off; but he did not do that. He knew how important it was that Lawrence and Allenby work closely together. Allenby's force had been weakened by the withdrawal of several divisions for service in France; and the main body of the Rualla tribe, on whom Lawrence had counted, still hadn't shown up.

Together, Allenby and Lawrence had but a skeleton army with which to defeat the Turks.

"I'll leave at dawn," he promised.

Lawrence nodded, leaned back against the great rock by which he was standing. And then after a long pause he asked quietly, "I wonder what people are doing in England tonight?"

Wilton could hardly believe that he had

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heard correctly. He had always thought that Lawrence's only interest was in Arabia.

V

THE Handley-Page had been grounded for the past two days. The trouble, according to Scott, was with the motor. He had torn it down and had put it back together and then had torn it down again.

The morning after Wilton's talk with Lawrence he was still working on it. It was noon before he announced that it was ready for a trial flight.

Wilton doubted that anything had been wrong with the plane's motor and he told Scott so with a characteristic bluntness. Though his words brought a touch of pallor to Scott's cheeks, the airman had nothing to say.

They took off just after noon; turned south, following the line of the railroad through Palestine. At an altitude of ten thousand feet they circled Amman.

The camp of the Turkish army could be easily distinguished. From it a steady stream of soldiers was heading north, some mounted, some on foot. Motor lorries and armored cars were lifting a dust in the road.

The sight of all that activity brought a tight, strained expression to Wilton's face. This was what Lawrence had feared might happen. If only a few reserves were sent back to quell the trouble around Deraa, he could easily handle them; but if all the thousands of men under the command of Djemal Pasha, the Turkish commander-in-chief, were to fall back, Allenby's coup would be ruined.

When Scott looked back at him after circling the place for several times, Wilton waved his arm toward Ramleh and the plane straightened out and thundered off in that direction.

The landing field at Ramleh was near the hospital established by the Red Cross.

As the Handley-Page bumped along the ground Wilton thought that he caught a glimpse of Helen Cavanaugh standing in front of one of the hospital tents, waving at him. The realization that he might see her brought a smile to his lips and for a moment lifted the feeling of depression which had settled over him.

"Gas up the plane," he ordered Scott as he swung to the ground. "We're going back as soon as I've talked to Allenby."

Wilton hurried directly from the landing field to Allenby's headquarters. There was a suppressed excitement around the place. Couriers were dashing up on horseback with reports, were leaving again with new orders. Allenby's push had started. Wilton could sense that as definitely as if the fact had been announced by posters.

HE WAS admitted to the general's presence almost at once. As soon as Allenby saw him the general asked sharply, "What has happened at Deraa?"

"Just what Lawrence promised you would happen," Wilton answered. "The raliroad has been cut, the highway blocked. No trains or lorries have moved south of Deraa for four days."

"The telegraph wires?"

"Down."

Allenby nodded, rubbed his hands together. Excitement showed in his usually calm face. "We have started," he said to Wilton. "There has been almost no resistance. By this time Nablus should have fallen and our men should be entering Nazareth."

"I flew here by way of Amman," Wilton interrupted. "From what I could see it looked as if the whole Fourth Turkish Army was starting north toward Deraa."

Allenby stiffened. "What's that?"

Wilton repeated what he had said. He didn't need to explain. By the expression on Allenby's face he knew that the general understood the seriousness of the situation. The general turned to a map, studied it for a moment. He said under his breath, "Lawrence will have to stop them south of Deraa. He will have to hold them for three days."

"He can't," Wilton answered simply. "He has a few armored cars, a few dozen machine guns. The Turks have ten times

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as many. Lawrence's men are Bedouins. They fight on horseback. They know only how to dash in at an enemy, strike as vicious a blow as they can—then if the odds against them are too great, they can only wheel around and ride away. They haven't the training to make a stand against a modern army."

Allenby clenched his fists. "I know that all you say is true," he admitted. "Still, in spite of that, Lawrence must stop them. If the Fourth Turkish army passes Deraa and reaches Damascus before we can get there, our cause is lost. I tell you, Lawrence must stop them."

Wilton's lips tightened. He nodded his head.

"Tell Lawrence," said Allenby, "that my army will drive forward faster than any other advance was ever made in all history. Tell him if he holds those Turks back for two days it will be enough. Tell him England demands it. We can make no variation in our plan to meet this emergency."

Again Wilton nodded. He said, and it seemed as if someone else were speaking the words for him, "Lawrence will stop them, General."

WILTON left Allenby's headquarters in a strange sort of mental trance. He had a feeling that the promise he had made in Lawrence's name would be kept—but he did not know how. He knew only that it had to be kept.

He walked back to the landing field, out toward the plane; and then at the sudden memory of Helen Cavanaugh, turned in the direction of the hospital.

Helen must have seen him coming. She was waiting for him at the door to the main tent; and something in the girl's face jarred him almost with the force of a blow. She was unusually pale and her wide brown eyes mirrored an unmistakable agony. Faint, tight lines marked the corners of her lips.

Wilton stopped a pace away from the door, aware of a sudden anxiety. "What is it, Helen?" he demanded.

"You haven't heard?"

Wilton shook his head, frowning.

"Arthur was arrested the night you left," Helen said swiftly. "He was accused of—of selling information to the Turks. Of—of being a spy."

James Wilton moved closer to the girl. He lifted his hands to her shoulders, looked steadily into her eyes; and then, as he could feel the trembling of her body, he drew her into his arms, not caring who might be watching them.

"Tell me about it, Helen," he said quietly.

"He had been gambling again," Helen whispered against his shoulder. "He was terribly in debt. I—I don't think he realized what he was doing. I don't want to think he did. He— Oh, Jim, why couldn't he have been killed? I would rather he had been killed than have father—"

"Where is he, Helen?"

The girl's body grew suddenly tense. She hesitated, then muttered, "I—I don't know. He escaped. I don't know where—"

Wilton pushed the girl away from him so that he could see her face. He asked again, "Where is he, Helen?"

"I—I—"

"Where is he?" Wilton asked for a third time.

Helen Cavanaugh bit her lips. "He's here in the hospital. One of the wounded men died. I carried his body out at night, hid it. I helped Arthur get away, brought him here, put him in that man's place. There's only one doctor and I've been able to keep him away from Arthur."

Wilton drew a long, ragged breath. He knew how fond of her brother Helen was in spite of all his faults. To his mind there came a picture of Helen's father, that prominent, grand old man who was serving under the war secretary. Wilton knew what a blow this would be to him.

"Helen," he said abruptly, "go inside, take the bandages off of your brother and put him in a hospital coat. Send him out to my plane. Tell him to get in it."

Helen blinked at him, caught her breath.

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"You—you'll help him to get away?"

Wilton didn't answer that question. He said flatly, "Sooner or later he will be discovered here. I'll look after him, Helen."

"No! It's not fair. I—"

"Get him ready," Wilton said sharply. "I'll have Scott start the plane's motor."

He swung around, hurried over to the plane. There were several soldiers standing around it, talking to Scott. Half of the petrol cans which had been brought out had been packed into the storage space in the fuselage.

WILTON drew Scott aside. "We're taking a doctor back with us," he said bluntly. "Don't load any more petrol than you figure we'll need."

Scott shrugged. "It'll be plenty cramped in the observer's cockpit."

"What of it?" Wilton retorted. "Climb in and get the motor started. I want to get out of here as soon as the doctor shows up."

Scott called several of the soldiers to help him, finished loading in the petrol and then climbed into his seat. One of the soldiers swung the prop and the motor caught. The soldiers backed away.

Wilton hurried back to the hospital tent and Helen met him at the door. "He's ready," she whispered. "Jim, I—I don't know what to say. I—"

Wilton looked steadily at the girl. He had never lied to her. He couldn't lie to her now. "Helen," he said slowly, "I'm not helping Arthur to escape. I'm taking him to Lawrence. The whole Fourth Turkish Army has busted loose from Amman and is heading north. Lawrence has to stop them. Do you understand what I mean?"

Helen moistened her lips. "You will—"

Wilton nodded. "It is a better way than a firing squad."

The girl caught her lips between her teeth. A low moan came from her throat. Her eyes closed.

And then she suddenly leaned forward and her hands, clutching at Wilton's arms, fastened there with a grip which almost made him wince. "You will be there too," he heard her gasp. "No, Jim. No. I couldn't stand that. I—"

The girl's head was pressed against Wilton's shoulder and great sobs were racking her body. Wilton held her tight in his arms. The thought came to him that this was probably their farewell, that he might never see her again.

He knew what lay ahead. Lawrence would try with every force at his command to stop that Turkish army. Not many of them would last to see the end of the campaign.

He found that he could tell himself that matter-of-factly; his calmness was surprising to him.

He lifted Helen's face, looked down into it and smiled. He knew that he couldn't talk to her about what was to come.

He said, "Helen, after all this is over and when people come to realize what Lawrence was able to accomplish in Arabia it's going to be very clear that he has a deep love for that country.

"But I discovered something else about Lawrence the other night. We were standing alone under the stars and he suddenly began to talk about England. His love isn't only for Arabia. It's for his homeland, too.

"And it's that deep love which has stood in the way of the imperialism which threatened the world, which will always stand in the way of any danger. It's so much a part of the English people that none of us is without it. Always remember that."

From the look in Helen's eyes Wilton doubted that she had heard a word that he had said. Over her shoulder he caught a glimpse of Arthur. He motioned to him to come on, bent and kissed Helen lightly on the lips. "Goodby, dear," he murmured. "We'll get along, Arthur and I."

He turned around, then, and dashed toward the plane while Cavanaugh followed No attempt was made to stop them. Later. Wilton knew, men might wonder what doctor had left in that Handley-Page and an investigation might be started. But any investigation would come too late.

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VI

SCOTT made a bumpy landing at the camp at the base of Mount Tell Ara. It was almost a disastrous landing. The plane's wheels struck some obstruction on the rocky ground. It bounced into the air, tilted over and came down again, partially on one wing, crumpling it as if it had been paper.

Wilton boosted Cavanaugh out and then climbed out himself. He surveyed the damaged plane, glanced over at Scott and said flatly, "Anything to keep out of the air. You want to live a long time, don't you, Scott?"

A flush of anger showed in Scott's face. "That's a damn lie, Wilton. I didn't see that ridge."

Wilton shrugged, turned away, strode toward the Bedouin campfire a little distance away. A tall, slender figure arose from beside the fire and came forward to meet him. There was a bloody gash on the man's thin, dark face but his lips were smiling.

"Tabari!" Wilton cried.

"Yes, Sidi Wilton," said the Arab. "We would have been here sooner but a troop of the infidel Turks crossed our path."

As he spoke, Tabari's hand lifted to the cut across his face.

Wilton smiled. He could well guess what had happened to the Turks. "Where is the Sidi Lawrence?" he asked.

Colonel Stirling, a Briton, who like Wilton was serving with Lawrence and the Arabs, came forward. "Lawrence has gone to Azarak," he reported.

"To Azarak!" Wilton gasped.

Stirling nodded. "To meet several tribal *shereefs*. He feels that we must have more men. What's up, Wilton?"

In short, pithy sentences, Wilton told Stirling what he had observed from the air above Amman, what Allenby had said to him, what Allenby had asked of Lawrence. And as he spoke, Stirling's face grew grave.

"We can never do it," he muttered as Wilton finished.

"We've got to do it," Wilton answered.

He moved on to the fire, stared around at the Bedouins squatting near it. There were fewer than a score in this group, but here and there throughout the foothills were other campfires and other Arabs.

Stirling came up to him and said, "More troops have come down from Damascus. The Turks are making every effort to repair the railroad. A dozen patrols are scouring the countryside. We've been kept mighty busy. With what men we have here it's all we can do to keep the tracks cut and the way to the south blocked."

"If the Fourth Turkish Army gets up here that won't be important," Wilton answered. And then, "How many machine guns in this crowd?"

"Six," Stirling answered. "And plenty of ammunition."

WILTON rubbed his hands together. "Stirling, do you remember that old medieval castle south of here, near the railroad, about half way to Amman?"

Stirling nodded.

"I went through it once," Wilton continued. "The place has about fallen to pieces but where the walls are still standing they are thick and are of stone. That castle commands the route along which the Turks must come. A few men with machine guns might hold it for a long time."

"Against an army?"

"Even against an army. Stirling, I want you to ride after Lawrence. I want you to tell him what I have told you. Tell him that those Turks must be stopped, that they must be held back for two days. Tell him that I will be at that old castle."

"And I with you. Someone else can ride after Lawrence."

Wilton shook his head. "No one else will do. You know the situation, the desert route to Azarak."

As if the matter were decided, Wilton lifted his voice and started addressing the Bedouins. He spoke to them in their own tongue, in the calm and yet impressive way which Lawrence had used so often and so successfully.

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He did not go into any detail as he explained what must be done. He only said that the Turkish army now moving up from Amman must be stopped, must be held back for two days; that if that were accomplished, Lord Allenby and the British would reach Damascus and would deliver a death blow to the hated infidels.

"I go to stop them," he concluded. "I would like to have you go with me."

He had hardly finished speaking before Tabari moved over to his side and said simply, "I will go with you, *sidi.*"

"And I," said another of the Bedouins.

A wrinkled old man with a long, flowing beard got to his feet. "I have lived too long already," he announced. "I will go too."

Here and there others were standing; and as he looked from side to side, Wilton felt a sudden pride in his friendship with these people. Not a one of them but knew the danger they were facing; yet without any hesitation at all each was signifying his willingness to go along.

Scott stood over to one side, scowling, and as Wilton's eyes fell on him he looked away.

"You, too, are going, Scott," Wilton announced. He glanced at Tabari. "See that he accompanies us."

A hand touched Wilton's arm. He swung around. A pale, perspiring Arthur Cavanaugh was blinking at him.

"May I—go along with you?" Cavanaugh asked.

Wilton nodded. "We will not come back, you know."

"Yes, I know," Cavanaugh said slowly. "That's why I—want to go."

Stirling grasped Wilton's hand. "I think you're crazy," he said thickly, "but I'd give anything to be in your shoes. Hang on until Lawrence and I can get there."

Wilton nodded. He took the reins of the horse Tabari brought him, made sure that the axe *Bretwalda* was strapped behind the saddle, mounted, and looked around at the others.

Scott was a miserable, huddled figure on the back of a horse near Tabari. Cavanaugh was climbing into a saddle. He was still perspiring—trembling, Wilton thought. The Bedouins had finished breaking camp and most of them were ready to leave.

Wilton raised his arm in a signal, turned and headed south.

VII

THE old castle stood on the crown of a little hill at the north end of a wide valley encircled by a rough, mountainous country to the east and to the west.

By its position Wilton knew that it had once commanded much of this territory. The railroad and the highway to the north turned around the base of the hill, close under its crumbling walls.

No one lived in the castle. Like many another landmark left by the Crusaders, it was thought by the Arabs to be inhabited by evil spirits; and for hundreds of years it had been neglected.

From the great gaps in the walls Wilton felt that this place had once been the scene of a long and bitter struggle. Who had erected it, he didn't know. Tancred, he thought, or perhaps Behemond who had come with Godfrey de Bouillon on the first great Crusade to the Holy Land and who had remained here in an effort to establish a Christian kingdom.

They had reached the castle in the early dawn after a night of hard riding; and now, as the first rays of the morning sun were stabbing at them from the eastern hills, they were making a hurried inspection of the place.

Beyond the crumbling walls and across a narrow courtyard was the donjon, or keep, the house in which the lord of the castle had once lived and where he had held court. The donjon walls were thick and were of almost solid stone.

Here and there around the place were narrow openings where archers had probably once been stationed, but they were high up where the second floor of the donjon had probably been, a floor which had long ago rotted away.

Finished with his inspection, Wilton

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sought out Tabari and drew him apart from the others. "Select the youngest of your men," he ordered, "and have him take our horses and lead them away. I have a feeling that we will not need them again."

Tabari flashed a smile. "I will send my brother Yusef. I would like to know that my people still have a *shereef* after today."

"Send him, of course," Wilton nodded.

One of the Bedouins who had been staring to the south called out a warning; and moving over to where he stood, Wilton looked that way. Far across the meadow he could make out a troop of Turkish cavalry. He shook his head.

"That is but a patrol. We must let them pass. We are here for bigger game."

During the next two hours, Wilton disposed of his men. With the huge stones which had once been a part of the wall, barricades were erected around the machine guns and the machine guns were so placed as to command each slope.

Yusef had left with the horses, cutting their force down to nineteen men: Tabari and fifteen of his Bedouin followers, Wilton, Scott, and Cavanaugh. Scott had assumed charge of one of the machine guns and Cavanaugh another.

"I can handle this thing," Scott had said through stiff lips. "I'm going to show you something, Wilton."

All throughout the night's ride and through the early hours of the morning, Scott had had little to say. Wilton couldn't quite make him out. The man was a coward, he knew; yet there had been a strange steadiness in his voice as he had announced his intention of taking charge of one of the machine guns.

Cavanaugh, too, had calmed down. There was a strange, glistening look in his eyes; but his hands did not tremble as he tore down his machine gun and reassembled it.

IN THE middle of the morning another Turkish patrol rode up the valley and around the foot of the hill, under the castle.

This patrol was larger, numbering several hundred men, but Wilton let it pass without revealing his presence. The main army of the Turks, he knew, could not be far behind.

He felt no excitement and was a little surprised that he should be so calm. They would never escape from here, any of them. Of that he was sure. And he decided that it was probably his acceptance of that fact which had steadied him.

Tabari, who had been standing near the wall staring toward the south, swung around and came over to where Wilton was resting. "They come, *sidi*," he announced. "So many that I could not number them."

Wilton stood up and went over to where Tabari had been. A great cloud of dust hovered over the southern end of the valley. In front of it he could make out a troop of cavalry and behind them foot soldiers. Sunlight flashed from their shouldered guns.

For the space of several minutes he stood there watching the advance. The cavalry troop drew nearer and nearer and the line of foot soldiers extended on back until it was swallowed by the dust cloud which was beginning to spread out over the valley.

He nodded and said under his breath, "Yes, here they come."

Then turning to Tabari who had followed him, he ordered, "Tell our men that those on horseback are to be allowed to ride past the castle. When those on foot are just below us, we will open fire. And Tabari, no shot must be wasted."

The Arab hurried off.

Wilton stared down at the axe *Bretwalda*. He had carried it with him since arriving at the castle—just why he didn't know. In this old medieval castle it had felt very natural in his hands. It had seemed to belong here. It had seemed to fit in.

Once, he knew, a Wilton had carried this axe through the Holy Land; and the thought had come to him that perhaps that ancestor of his had even wielded

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Bretwalda in defense of these very walls.

He wondered about that; smiled; swung the axe to his shoulder, carried it over to the donjon and leaned it against the wall.

On up the road came the Turkish army. The leading cavalry troop swept around the foot of the hill and the foot soldiers followed after them. Those in the front circled the hill and turned away from it. Wilton glanced from left to right. He raised a hand and said, "Now!"

The crashing rattle of the machine gun fire was answered by screams and loud cries and by a few scattered rifle shots. The column down below had been thrown into confusion.

Dozens of men were sprawled out on the ground, and from the way they were lying Wilton knew that they would never rise again. Some of the soldiers had turned and were racing away. Others had thrown themselves to the ground and were firing back.

Turkish officers rode back and forth on galloping horses, shouting orders and pointing up to the castle. More swiftly than he had thought it possible, a charge was organized and hurled against the hill.

But it was an ineffective charge. With a deadly precision, the Bedouin machine gunners mowed it down.

Wilton hurried over to the south wall. The advancing Turkish army had stopped and men were spreading out to the east and to the west. An armored car rolled up the road and several officers got out. Mounted officers rode up to where they stood, gathered around them for a moment, then hurried away.

And now the chattering of a machine gun sounded from the other side of the castle and Wilton moved that way. The cavalry troop which had passed, he saw, had turned back at the sound of the battle and was riding up the hill.

It was Scott who was stationed at the machine gun at that side; he was handling the weapon very effectively. Several Bedouins with rifles supported him. And that charge, just as the charge of the soldiers, was broken.

FOR a time, then, a period of silence settled over the valley. The soldiers who had moved out to the east and west circled north, and closed in where the road pased through the hills. They didn't advance but merely stood there, waiting.

From the south, great lumbering motor lorries appeared; and a few minutes later, cannon were unloaded from them and wheeled into position to fire on the castle.

More and more men filed up the valley and strengthened the lines on either side. One of the cannons roared and a shell screamed overhead.

The second shell was closer. The third struck the donjon wall, smashing in a section of it and spattering Wilton with broken fragments of rock. He moved over toward one of the machine gun nests and squatted down by Cavanaugh.

Cavanaugh looked over at him and grinned. His round, plump face was perspiring again. "They're gettin' close to home," he shouted. "We can't stand much of that. I wish they'd try comin' up the hill again."

Wilton nodded. He lay flat on his face while the cannonading continued. The Turk gunners now had the range of the castle and were sending shell after shell crashing against its walls, tumbling them in and showering Wilton's men with broken rock.

Then after a while the cannons grew silent and Wilton sat up. He studied the encircling army for a moment, nodded and said to Cavanaugh, "They're going to come up the hill again. Wait until they're so close that you can't miss."

That same message he took from post to post. Several of the Bedouins had been cut by flying rock but none was seriously hurt. Though the donjon was almost reduced to ruins, the shells had had no other effect.

That second charge came from every side; and as the Turks reached the foot of the hill they started firing their rifles and screaming in defiance.

Wilton watched them come on. It did not seem possible, now, that they could be

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stopped. There were too many of them. By force of numbers alone they could surge on and over the place.

He lifted his arm and shouted, "Now!"

And again the chattering machine guns spewed destruction at the oncoming horde. Great gaps appeared in the Turkish ranks. Here and there the men in the front ranks fell to the ground to prove stumbling blocks for those who followed.

At one side a score of the Turks gained the level space at the top of the hill; but the Bedouins there rose up with clubbed rifles and swords and drove them back. In other places the charge broke a dozen yards short of its goal and once more the Turks fell back and drew away from the old castle, leaving their wounded behind.

THE sun had crawled across the top of the sky and was sinking down behind the western hills. Wilton was a little surprised that it was so late.

That second charge had been more disastrous than the first one. Four of the Bedouins were dead; Scott and two more Bedouins were wounded.

Scott had a ball through the shoulder. Tabari had dressed it, binding the arm tight to the man's side and packing the wound so that it couldn't bleed. It must have been painful but Scott hadn't uttered a word.

Tabari prepared and brought food and said, "The infidels have set up their camp. We have stopped them, *sidi*."

"Until tomorrow," Wilton answered. "It is not long enough."

. . . More cannonading started at dusk and continued intermittently for several hours. One shell struck directly on one of the machine gun nests, destroying the gun and killing three more men.

Two raiding parties tried to creep up the hill from opposite sides a little later but were detected and were driven back.

The night was long. Out in the valley Wilton could see the campfires of the Turkish army.

At one time during that night, Cavanaugh sought him out—a quiet, sober Cavanaugh, whose manner reminded him of the chubby, round-faced boy with whom he had played in his youth.

"I wanted to tell you this," Cavanaugh said to him. "I've figured out why it was that you helped me to escape. And it may sound funny, but I appreciate it."

Wilton didn't know what to answer.

"It was a rotten thing I did," Cavanaugh went on. "This won't make up for it, I know, but I can at least find a little satisfaction in this kind of a death."

Wilton was standing against a part of the old wall. He stared off toward the Turkish campfires and answered slowly, "I've been thinking again of England tonight, trying to remember what it was like back there, trying to face the fact that I would never see it again.

Wilton closed his eyes and his mind called up the picture of Helen Cavanaugh as he had last seen her.

VIII

THE cannonading started again with the dawn; and with the first rays of the sun, the Turks again began their advance on the hill. They came this time not in any solid wall of men, easily broken by the machine gunners; but in single ranks, far apart.

And wave after wave was thrown against the slope, some gaining almost the top before they were driven back.

Wilton kept moving from one machine gun post to another. At the north wall, Scott sat grimly behind his weapon. His handsome face was marked by deep lines and there was a flush of fever in his cheeks. When Wilton reached him he glanced up and asked sharply, "Well, how am I doing? Could you handle this thing any better?"

Wilton shook his head. He looked down at this man whom he had thought a coward, to whom he attributed his brother's death. He said bluntly, "No, I couldn't do any better."

A hoarse laugh came from Scott's throat. He said thickly, "You were right, Wilton. I did run off and leave your brother. But

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the ghost of his ship has followed me through the air ever since."

A shudder gripped the man's frame. He looked over his gun, shook his fist at the Turkish lines and screamed, "Come on, damn you. I'm not afraid any more. Come on up here where this gun will reach."

They were coming again. Out in the meadows below the old castle the Turkish officers were whipping their lines back into shape, were ordering the men forward. And now not only single battalions but the entire army was forming into position for the assault.

The cannons rained shell after shell on the old castle and at the walls; and another of Wilton's machine gun nests was wiped out. A little before that there had been twelve of them left. Now there were only nine.

As the cannonading stopped and as the Turks started forward again Wilton realized that this would be the last charge. He glanced up at the sun. It was only two hours high in the heavens.

His lips tightened bitterly. If they could have but held out until noon, he thought the Turks might have had to spend the rest of the day here, burying their dead and caring for the wounded.

But they couldn't hold out until noon. In another four hours the Turks would again be on their way north.

Grimly and steadily did that Turkish line move to the foot of the hill, start up the slope. Rifle shots laced the air and the staccato crackling of the machine guns spoke in answer.

The advancing line sagged but formed again and came on. One of Wilton's machine guns was suddenly silenced and then another stopped firing as the man who had been handling it slumped forward.

Wilton raced that way. He tilted the man's body aside, reached for the trigger and sprayed a circle of lead down the side of the hill.

The gun jammed. He reached for a rifle and emptied it. Out of the corner of his eye he could see that the Turks had gained the crest of the hill at the north side.

He caught a picture of Scott standing there. Scott, the coward. There was a clubbed rifle in Scott's hands and he was swinging it from side to side. The Turks closed in around him and he went down.

WILTON jerked erect. He felt a stab of pain in his side, knew that he had been struck by a bullet. Over near the old donjon he caught sight of Tabari, two other Bedouins and Cavanaugh.

Tabari was just lowering his rifle and now he clutched his sword, drew it, and with a screaming yell, charged directly at the men pouring over the hill top."

Cavanaugh waited where he was but the two Bedouins raced after Tabari.

Half stumbling and acutely aware of the pain in his side, Wilton moved over to where Cavanaugh stood. Near him, still leaning against a part of the donjon wall which had not fallen, was the axe *Bretwalda*.

Wilton dropped his useless rifle. He reached for the axe, swung it to his shoulder, jerked around—and a cry which he did not recognize as his own burst from his lips.

It was a loud, defiant, mocking cry, such as might have once sounded from the throat of an earlier Wilton in the Middle Ages. The pain in his side was forgotten and he was unaware of the great weight of the axe.

He saw Tabari go down, saw the two Bedouins who had followed him sink under the crackling shots of a dozen rifles. Cavanaugh staggered forward, swung his gun at the men who were closing in, tripped and fell. A slashing sword in the hands of one of the Turkish officers cut down at his head.

Wilton moved a step forward and struck out with the great axe. He slashed with it from side to side. Men screamed and fell back under its cutting blows.

Wilton turned to the right and then to the left, swinging *Bretwalda* as easily as if it had no weight at all. There was a strange, fixed smile on his face—such a smile as might greet the news that already

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Lawrence was on his way down here to take up where he had had to stop.

He couldn't have known that, of course. He couldn't have known that several thousand more tribesmen had joined Lawrence's forces and that even now they were lining the hills to the north.

He couldn't have known that from here on up the Turks were to blunder into a running battle with Lawrence's men which would result in their complete defeat. Nor could he have known that within a week Allenby and the British would enter Damascus; that this engagement would mark the breaking of the Ottoman Empire and the beginning of the end for Germany.

Yet even as the Turks again crowded in around him and as a score of shots drove him to his knees, he was still smiling. And though he did not understand it, the feeling of victory was surging strongly through his body.

A vision came to him in that last moment, a composite vision of all of his memories of England. It seemed to him that the green rolling hills lay just ahead, beckoning him, and that Helen was there, smiling and waving in greeting. He thought that he stood up and started running toward her.

•

One of the Turks rolled Wilton's body aside with the toe of his boot, stooped over and picked up the axe *Bretwalda*. He looked at the bloody head of the axe and scowled.

He had thought that he had seen a flashing set there in the steel; but, now he decided that he must have been wrong. There were a dozen indentations in the head of the axe where jewels might once have been.

All of them, however, were empty.

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Gees let the glass fall to his side—and felt released within him another self, jubilant and bewitched

Maker of Shadows

By JACK MANN

Author of "The Ninth Life"

MARGARET AYLENER, a wealthy Scottish spinster, summons the English investigator, Gregory George Gordon Green (popularly known as Gees) to her home, The Rowans, in a remote and ancient corner of the highlands. Gees is struck by its eeriness—the four Rowans set in a protective circle about the house; the swirling mist peopled with writhing shadows; and the tense, remembering atmosphere of the neighborhood where ghosts of past horrors seem to linger.

Miss Aylener wants Gees to protect the last of her family, her niece Helen, from one Gamel MacMorn, whom she believes to be a survival from pre-Druidic times. The monoliths that stand around his house, she claims, are the thirteen stones of life and death, each planted upon the chests of living worshipers of some ancient and terrible god for the purpose of insuring a renewal of life to the high priest of the cult. Thus has Gamel MacMorn lived through the endless ages, refreshing his life at the cost of others. And this is what she fears he plans to do to Helen now. Already he has begun to spin his web that fastens the girl to him. "Set Helen free," she begs.

This story began in the Argosy for December 9

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Gees, himself a student of ancient religions, shakes his head. "There would be only one way to do that without destroying her sanity—if what you say is true."

Miss Aylener nods placidly. "Kill Gamel MacMorn. I know. I will give you half of all I possess—and I am a wealthy woman—if you will wipe that monster off the face of the earth."

Gees refuses. He is an unofficial agent of the law, and what Miss Aylener so coolly suggests is murder.

LATER Gees set out to investigate for himself. He meets Helen and her fiancé, Ian Kyrle, and realizes that the girl is under some sort of hypnotic control. He visits MacMorn's land and, observing the position of the strangely engraved monoliths, sees that they do indeed form a pre-Druidic circle; and that MacMorn's house, directly in its center, stands on the site of the ancient altar.

He talks with MacMorn, but he cannot shake the man's completely innocent manner. Everything that Miss Aylener says, Gees decides, may well be true, incredible as they seem. The swirling shadow-shapes in the fog may indeed be the detached personalities or soul-essences of worshipers sacrificed at the altar, whose life-power, transfused into MacMorn, has prolonged his span of days beyond the memory of man. But still Gees cannot bring himself to kill.

Yet there is one sinister happening which he cannot forget in a walk which Helen persuades him to take with her through the fog. The shapes hem them in, threaten them both. He warns Helen.

HE RETURNS to London and plunges into a baffling sequence of events, all of which bear unmistakable marks of being attempts on his life. His car is lost in a fog, and a strange force seems intent upon pushing him into an abyss. While driving with Eve Brandon, his secretary, they are attacked by an unnatural swarm of flies, thick, blinding and angry, which nearly sends them crashing to their deaths. And Gees admits that he is more afraid than he has ever been in his life—that he did not know what fear was until he met Gamel MacMorn. The flies, the fog—whose work could they be but MacMorn's?

Finally, Gees, seated in his club catches a glimpse of MacMorn's face passing by the window. Moments later a huge chandelier crashes down from the ceiling, missing him by inches.

Gees' anger reaches the boiling point. He is, he says, "mad enough to kill. And maybe I will. Maybe I'll have to. . . ."

CHAPTER XIII

THE WEB IS TANGLED

WHEN Tony Briggs had gone his way, Gees loafed aimlessly through Piccadilly Circus toward Leicester Square. He had a nodding acquaintance with a number of its nocturnal frequenters—those of whom the average man disclaims all knowledge among his respectable fellows. But Gees said none never knew when they might be useful. Tonight, there were plenty of these weary ladies on parade.

He found one of them close beside him, from nowhere. She said, without looking at him, "Oh, puritan, got a few minutes to spare?"

"Now you know that's no good with me, Betty."

"Don't I just? Might as well try to get a smile from the cenotaph. No, but I do want to get into the beer parlor, and you know they won't let us girls in alone. Take me in, and I'll pay for the drinks. Will you?"

He turned about with her. "I'll buy 'em," he said. "What's he like—or do you want to scratch somebody's eyes out?"

"Darling, you're an angel," she told him, "and I wouldn't spoil my manicure for any doublecrosser. But it ain't that at all. A pasty-faced josser I bumped into the other night—only I wasn't quite stony then and didn't like his complexion—he told me I could find him down in the beer place every night this week up to tomorrow. And I am stony now. If you hadn't said you'd pay for the drinks, I'd had to borrow a half-crown off you to do it. I've only got threepence left."

"The moral is obvious," Gees observed, as they reached the doorway of the place she wanted to visit, and turned in.

She paused on the top step and said: "Moral be blast! I could get twenty pound on the piano, and I haven't pawned a thing, yet."

The commissionaire in the doorway, overhearing the statement, grinned, and caught the shilling Gees threw at him be-

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fore following Betty down the stairs. Inside, they took a bucket chair apiece and he ordered a small lager for himself and *advocaat* for her. She looked round the place carefully, and in the end shook her head.

"Not got here, yet," she said. "You couldn't mistake him."

"You should have ordered a longer drink," Gees pointed out. "It's rather late, though. What's this prize packet like, when he arrives?"

"Oh, weird," she said, and left it at that till the waiter had gone off with his tip. "Face like chalk and eyes like coals. He spoke quite good English, but I don't think he was. Creepy sort of foreigner, I thought."

"I'm interested." Gees leaned his folded arms on the table between them. "Now tell me all about it, Betty. I've been batted in the face by so many coincidences lately that I think this may be another."

"Well it was—let me see—yes, last Friday. I'd left the flat about seven, and came down here and ran straight into him, just about where I met you before we came in here just now. He looked at me, and I spoke. Without thinking, before I'd looked at him properly and got a sight of his eyes, really. And then I saw he was taking me all in from top to toe, as if he was measuring me up to see if I'd fit into a space or something.

"It was weird, I tell you. He wanted to stand there and talk, but I wouldn't. So he walked along with me as far as the Circus, and I tell you I was glad to get his eyes off me. Weird, they were. Black as coals.

"I made up my mind to quit him at the Circus and turn back. He told me he'd give me twenty pound, cash down, if I'd promise to go to Bristol some time toward the end of this week—go by the train he'd tell me, from Paddington. He said he'd meet me there, and give me the twenty pound to start with so I'd know it was all right. But it smelt fishy to me.

"I couldn't see what sort of decoy duck he was making out of me, and thought I might get landed in something nasty if I agreed. So I turned it down, but he slipped a ten-shilling note into my hand and said if I did happen to change my mind, I'd only to look down here any night up to tomorrow, and the trip would be on."

Gees reflected, as she took a tiny sip of the *advocaat* and put the glass down. "Betty," he said, "do something for me, will you?"

"Anything you say, darling." Her eyes were fervent.

Gees smiled. "All I want is for you to stand up for about half a minute, away from the table so I can see down to your feet. You can pretend to look round for somebody."

"Right-ho, darling." She rose to her feet and stood clear of the table, and Gees made a swift survey of her, noting every detail of her figure and dress. He said: "That'll do, thank you," and she sat down again and took another sip at the *advocaat*.

"Got a nice figure, haven't I?" she said, with obvious self-satisfaction. "Sometimes I wish my legs weren't quite so long, but it's better that way than the other, isn't it?"

"A long way better," Gees agreed, rather abstractedly.

SEEING her casually, he knew, one would take her for something better than her speech proclaimed her. She was built on fine lines, and had quite an attractive face and clear complexion. Pale gold hair, too, and as nearly as he could estimate she was Helen's height. There was not half an inch of difference between them, at most. High-waisted, like Helen, and obviously long-legged. Put the two of them side by side, and there would be no mistaking one for the other, but, issue a description of Helen, and Betty would fit it, past question.

But why Bristol?

"Did he tell you any more than what you've told me?" Gees asked.

"No. Only he said we might go a little sea trip, perhaps."

"Did he, though? Whereabouts, from Bristol?"

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"Up the coast. He said it was lovely round the—the Orkneys, it was. But that wasn't definite. He said we might, that was all."

"Do you know where I live, Betty?"

She shook her head. "You're around a lot, and that's all I know," she answered.

He took a card from his pocket, and then a ten-shilling note. "If this black-eyed boy of yours turns up either tonight or tomorrow night, I want you to hustle round to that address the minute he leaves you, and let me know what train you're taking for Bristol and anything else there is to know. Okay?"

"I promise, darling. You save my life with that note."

"Come around with definite news of him, and you'll find five more waiting for you. Third floor, and ring when you get there."

"Oh, Gees!" She gazed at the card. "Confidential, too! Darling, make it two notes now, and four then, in case he doesn't turn up till tomorrow night. Last week's rent is heavy on my conscience."

He watched a second ten-shilling note disappear inside her handbag. "I'll leave you to it," he said, "and count on seeing you."

"Goodnight, angel. Be good till we meet again."

Half past ten, his watch told him when he reached the pavement outside. For a quarter of an hour he paced slowly back and forth, idly scrutinizing shop windows, keeping the entrance to the beer parlor in sight all the time.

Then, deciding that Betty would keep a vain vigil that evening, he turned toward the Haymarket and Little Oakfield Street, and home.

Some force, he reflected as he undressed and got into bed, was acting for him in this series of escapes that had been his since he set out to return to London from The Rowans. The pit into which he had so nearly driven, the swarm of flies that had blinded both him and the truck driver, and the falling chandelier had all failed as death-traps, and he knew that, reasonably speaking, one of the five incidents ought to have resulted in his being killed.

One or two escapes of the kind would be within reason, but five in succession—no!

If the law of averages had not been suspended, he told himself with absolute certainty, he would have been dead.

THEN, of all the thousands of people who passed back and forth between Piccadilly Circus and the Hippodrome, he had met Betty. He refused to regard the meeting as a coincidence. Something had impelled her to accost him, and then to tell her story, just as something had impelled him to rise from his chair at the club and go to look out of the window, just in time to escape the falling chandelier. Why she was to go to Bristol he could not yet see.

MacMorn was in London.

Lying awake and puzzling over the problem, linking up MacMorn's presence with his own series of escapes, Gees questioned whether he was intended to follow Betty to Bristol, under the impression that she was Helen Aylener. It was a far-fetched idea, not less fantastic than all the rest of this sequence of events, but . . .

MacMorn, of course, was ignorant of the fact that Gees had declined to take any action for Margaret Aylener. It was just possible that he intended to present Betty in some guise that would induce Gees to believe her Helen, and—but why Bristol?

Was some other trap laid, either on the way to Bristol or in the city itself, into which Gees was to walk? MacMorn's anxiety to get rid of him was evident enough. Evident, too, was the existence of something working against MacMorn.

The shadows of Brachmornalachan, Margaret Aylener had said, were of her own people, forced to submit to MacMorn's control, different entirely from willing servants.

Supposing some of them—one of them, even—had so far escaped from control as to be able to impel Betty at the right

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moment, to impel Gees himself to go and look out through the club window at the right moment?

The theory was fantastic, but was there anything in connection with this business that was not, from a sane, practical standpoint?

Dawn was paling the sky when Gees fell asleep.

He was pulled back to consciousness by a series of coughs, raucous, vulgar explosions not far from his ear, and he opened his eyes to see the lady who came in every morning to cook him a breakfast and clean the flat. On paper, Mrs. Hogg, she insisted on being called Mrs. Hoe. It was no part of her program to enter his bedroom before he vacated it, and he scowled at her.

"Beg pardon, sir, there's a gentleman wants to see yer."

"My secretary will be here at ten," Gees said, observing the clock by his bedside, which pointed to half past eight. "Tell him to come back then. This is the middle of the night."

"Beg pardon, sir, I told him I dassen't disturb you, but he said it was most important, an' I must. I was to tell you 'is name is Kyrle. 'E spelt it, an' I was to tell you. K-y-r-l-e. Kyrle."

Gees sat up. "Tell him to come in here," he said.

CHAPTER XIV

JOURNEY TO THE MISTS

AS HE stood in the bedroom, looking up at Gees, who had got out of bed and stood beside it in his pajamas, Kyrle appeared shrunken, a different man altogether from the one who had bidden goodbye at The Rowans.

"You said I might get in touch with you," he said without greeting of any sort. There was a flat, hopeless note in his voice. "Helen's gone. Last night, and this morning. Gone."

"Begin at the beginning," Gees said. "Sit down and tell me."

"I can't sit down," Kyrle said. "I'd only —it's no use. Her aunt was right—I feel sure of it, now. And what's happening to her—"

"You'll do no good, like that," Gees cut in sharply. "I'm going to have my bath and breakfast. Gone from where? Brachmornalachan?"

"No, here," Kyrle answered. "She and Miss Aylener went to Edinburgh two days after I drove her to The Rowans—the day after you left. Then they came to London to do some final shopping before the wedding—Helen told me that was what they were after, before they left Edinburgh. I had to come here for the firm, yesterday. Helen and her aunt are staying at Grey's Hotel—you know it, I expect?"

Gees nodded, and seated himself on the edge of his bed. Grey's, one of the quietest, best, and most expensive hotels in London, was only three or four doors away from his own club—and he had seen MacMorn pass the club once, while Tony Briggs had seen him twice.

"What day did they arrive in London?" he asked.

"Last Friday. Does it matter? She's gone, I tell you."

Tony Briggs had first seen MacMorn on that day, Gees remembered, outside the club. He asked: "You saw Helen yesterday?"

"Dined with them," Kyrle answered. "I didn't stay long, because Helen said she had a bad headache and wanted to get to bed early. I'm staying at the Mornington.

"About an hour ago the telephone in my room went, and when I took off the receiver it was Miss Aylener. She'd gone into Helen's room and the bed hadn't been slept in. So according to that, Helen went out last night. I went round there to see Miss Aylener without even stopping for a bath or a shave.

"And then the man on the door this morning—I went down to ask him—he said he'd seen Helen get into a taxi outside the hotel not more than ten minutes before I got there. He hadn't seen her go out, and she hadn't got anything more

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than a handbag with her. He'd run to the pavement edge to open the taxi door for her, and heard her tell the driver to take her to Paddington.

"So you see—well, that's why I said last night and this morning. By the time I found that out, she'd been gone over half an hour, and I thought of you and came here instead of chasing her. I don't know London, you see, and—well, I thought—here I am."

"Have you had any breakfast yet?" Gees demanded.

"She didn't sleep in her room last night," Kyrle said, as if he had not heard the question, "and yet she was outside the hotel this morning to take that taxi to Paddington. Where was she—"

"Helen did not take that taxi," Gees interrupted him. "She came out from Grey's some time last night. Providence, or Fate, or something working against MacMorn, or plain silly coincidence if you like, put me in touch last night with the girl who told that driver to take her to Paddington, and it wasn't Helen Aylener. Whatever it was, it sent you here to me instead of letting you chase off after that other girl."

"Are you sure you know what you're talking about?" Kyrle asked.

"We start at ten-five, sharp."

"Start?" Kyrle echoed. "But—"

"For Brachmornalachan," Gees explained. "The Paddington part of it kept me awake quite a while last night, but I see it now. And I rather think hypnosis accounts for Betty not coming round to claim those other four notes—which means nothing to you, of course. Never mind."

"But—ten o'clock!" Kyrle protested. "That's an hour wasted!"

"My secretary arrives at ten," Gees explained calmly, "and I shall take just five minutes to bring her up to date on what has happened, and get her to go and see Miss Aylener at Grey's to explain that Helen isn't quite lost yet. And my car will be outside for us—unless, of course, you prefer to stay behind. I'm going, whatever you do."

"I'll follow your advice," Kyrle said. "This—well, it doesn't exactly fit into structural engineering. I mean, I don't *know* anything, and you seem to know everything. But that other girl—are you sure?"

Gees got up off the bed. "Put yourself under my orders, and between us we'll save Helen."

He managed to make the prophecy with apparent certainty, but he was far from confident. MacMorn had shown that he had power even here, in the midst of a solid materialism that rendered credence of the shadow magic ridiculous. At Brachmornalachan he would be on his own ground, at the very zenith of his strength.

"All the way by car?" Kyrle asked.

"Unless you're going from city to city, distances in this country are not enough to justify going by air," Gees answered. "Besides, we may need the car at the other end. We'll make it before dark."

CONDUCTED to a sitting room on the first floor at Grey's Hotel, Miss Brandon admitted to herself that Gees had been right in describing Margaret Aylener as the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. The deep blue, almost violet eyes were wonderful, and the delicate charm of the woman's face was unimpaired by age, even perfected by it.

"From Mr. Green, I understand?" Her voice, too, was perfect.

"He asked me to come straight to you," Miss Brandon said. "To explain. He and Mr. Kyrle have gone to Brachmornalachan, and he told me to tell you, he will stop at nothing. And to ask you what you know."

"He should have come here," Miss Aylener said sharply, with a note in her voice that marred its music. "Helen has not gone to Brachmornalachan. I followed her to Paddington, and described her there—made inquiries. She was recognized—she has gone to Bristol."

"That was done to mislead you," Miss Brandon said. "It is another girl, made up to look like your niece. Mr. Green thinks she will change her makeup on the train,

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even alter her clothes, and if you wire ahead or do anything to have her stopped when she gets to Bristol, there will be nobody corresponding nearly enough to the description you give for recognition by it. To delay you, keep you from inquiring at Brachmornalachan. But he and Mr. Kyrle, he told me to tell you, will be there almost as soon as she arrives, and perhaps before her."

"How do you—how does he know about this other girl, if what you say is true?" Miss Aylener asked. "How does he know anything at all?"

"He has been in very great danger, more than once," Miss Brandon answered, "and attributes it to—to having visited you and heard what you had to tell him—and ask of him. He is telephoning me between one and two, and I am to tell him everything you can tell me."

"You are—you work with him, then?"

"I am his secretary. He dictated a record of his visit to you and everything connected with it, and we talked it over as well."

"And now—yes, I understand. Except—he told me he would do nothing. And now you tell me he has gone with Ian?"

"Because there is real danger, now," Miss Brandon explained. "It was only a vague threat, before—until your niece went like this."

She waited. Miss Aylener asked: "What do you want me to tell you?"

"About last night. What, exactly, happened then?"

"Last night. Yes. We had been shopping—my niece and I had been shopping all the afternoon, and when we came back here I went to my room to rest. If this suite is available when we come to London, I always book it. This room, with my niece's bedroom on one side, and mine on the other—and a bathroom, of course.

"I went to my room, as I say, till nearly seven o'clock. When I came in here, my niece told me Mr. Kyrle was in London and had rung up. She had asked him to come to dinner with us, and he did. We all came up here after dinner, and at about ten o'clock my niece said she had one of her bad headaches and wanted to go to bed. Ian—Mr. Kyrle—bade us goodnight and left—"

"Just one moment, Miss Aylener. One of her bad headaches, you say. She is subject to them at times, you mean?"

"For the last year, since we came back from our Mediterranean trip. I made her see a specialist, in case she had caught some germ on that cruise, but he could find no cause for them."

"Was it on that cruise you and she went to Eleusis?"

"Yes, but I don't see why you should attach importance to that. We made the excursion with a party, as ordinary tourists."

"Yes, of course." Miss Brandon decided to say nothing about Helen's meeting with MacMorn on that excursion. "Mr. Green included your visit there in his dictation to me," she added. "He is always very thorough over the details of his cases in dictating reports on them."

"Until now, I thought he had declined to regard this as one of his cases," Miss Aylener said. "I wish he had not—" She broke off, then.

"You say your niece went to bed at ten o'clock," Miss Brandon prompted.

"A LITTLE after ten—it may have been half-past, even. She bade me goodnight and went to her room, through that doorway." She pointed at a closed door which she faced as she sat. "My room is through the door opposite, so with this room between us I do not hear what she does in hers, after I have gone to bed. Or before, if she goes first—these walls are practically soundproof.

"I stayed in here reading the evening paper till about eleven o'clock, and then went to my room. I did not go in to her, knowing as I do that she does not like to be disturbed when she has these headaches. But quite early this morning I went in and found the bed had not been slept in, and at once I rang Mr. Kyrle."

"Not under the impression that she was

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with him, surely?" Miss Brandon asked, and instantly regretted the question.

"Because Mr. Kyrle was the only person we know in London," Miss Aylener said, rather stiffly, "and because my niece might have let fall something in his hearing which would help me to decide where she had gone. But she had not.

"He came round here at once, and learned about her taking a taxi outside the hotel this morning—though you say now it was not my niece who took the taxi. The man on the door said it was, and described how she was dressed when Mr. Kyrle asked him."

"Could you give me that description?" Miss Brandon asked.

"The more easily since I recognized the clothes as hers. A gray flannel costume with white pin-stripe, gray stockings and gray suede shoes, small gray velour hat, a silver-fox fur, and a salmon-pink neckerchief. All of which she was wearing when we went shopping in the afternoon. I knew her at once by the description."

"And have you looked over her clothes since?" Miss Brandon persisted. "Are they the things that are missing from her room?"

"They must be! Why, who could—"

Miss Aylener rose and went toward the door she had indicated, and Miss Brandon followed her. They entered a fairly large, well-furnished bedroom, and Miss Aylener went to the wardrobe on the other side of the bed and opened it. She took out a long, silver-fox stole, and stared at the girl beside her.

"The costume—yes." Miss Brandon eyed the few clothes hanging in the wardrobe. "But there are the gray shoes"—she pointed at a row of shoes beside the dressing table. "Unless she had two pairs."

"She had not," Miss Aylener said. "The shoes—and the fur—"

"He saw her out yesterday afternoon," Miss Brandon guessed. "If the girl who went to Bristol changes the gray stockings for flesh-colored ones before she gets there, and takes off the neckerchief, and possibly throws the fox fur out of the window or hides it under a cushion in the train, who would identify her as the girl you described to a ticket-collector at Paddington? A pair of stockings would go in her handbag, and the rest is merely a matter of discarding things."

"You mean—?" The older woman looked at her, and in the look was respect for this swift, intuitive interpretation of evidence.

"Only that you—Mr. Kyrle—anyone interested was meant to inquire about somebody who went to Bristol. Quite possibly interest the Bristol police in a mysterious disappearance, for the girl who went there knows nothing about your niece, and couldn't attempt to impersonate her, even if she wished.

"One sentence, by what Mr. Green told me, would betray her as not your niece. Not that she would try, unless we are greatly mistaken. The impersonation was intended to last only until she had got on the train at Paddington. After that, the absolute disappearance of your niece, together with the utter mystery of her having gone to Bristol at all, was to drive you distracted and make you go on searching there."

"Yes. Yes." She laid her hand on Miss Brandon's arm. "My dear, how logical you are! I'm so very grateful to you for your kindness to an old woman. And you think—Mr. Green—?"

"THE wisest man I know, and the best. You—you shouldn't have offered to pay him to commit murder. He isn't like that. But I'm forgetting. About your niece's actual leaving here. You say you heard nothing, know nothing about it? The time she left, I mean. Didn't anyone see her go out last night? She must have gone then."

"I haven't asked," Miss Aylener answered. "You see—the taxi, and her being seen then, as I thought till we saw this fox fur. But there was a dinner party here last night, and I heard cars and people leaving until after midnight. A send-off for some expedition, and about a hundred guests dining in a special room. Men and

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women, all sorts of people, and some of them in ordinary day clothes. So she might have slipped out when they were leaving, and not been noticed."

"You think she went entirely alone and of her own accord?"

"My dear, *he* had only to call, from anywhere. She would have to respond—she would have to go when he called. If you understand."

"Not altogether. I don't know as much as Mr. Green knows. You mean, if he exercised some sort of influence, she would get up and walk out to him, without letting you know anything about it?"

"If he called from the other side of the world, she would go to him or die on the way. It was my fault. I should have gone quite away from Brachmornalachan with her, never let her see him."

"But—Miss Aylener—Mr. Green said in that report of his that it began at Eleusis. She first got really to know MacMorn there."

"Then I can forgive myself." She spoke after a long interval, and led the way back to the sitting room. "We have fought him so long, so very long! So many ages. I saw the dark men land. They should have killed them all, then!"

She went to the chair she had left to go into the bedroom, and sat down in it. The pupils of her eyes had shrunk to pin points, and left a blue deeper than that of the sea which rolls round Ithaca.

Miss Brandon stood, facing her, and did not speak.

"They took our people, thirteen to each stone," Miss Aylener said, and her voice that had been so perfectly musical was flat and dull. "In the blood of our people they drew the Unseen to dwell in the circle, and with him the Daughter, the Maiden possessed of all, yet whom none may possess. They made shadows, outside the lines of the rowans they made shadows. For each one of our people, a shadow to obey them—"

Her eyes closed, and she relaxed, shrank to the lines of the chair as if all the muscles of her body had lost their governing power. Miss Brandon went to her and took her hand, lifted it, and found it ice-cold. She slid her fingers until she found the pulse: it was normal, unhurried, but strong as that of her own heart's driving.

Margaret Aylener opened her eyes, and warmth came back to her fingers as they closed around those of the girl.

"Go now," she said. "Soon, he'll call you. Go, and answer."

Miss Brandon released her hand from the grasp of the older woman's fingers, and went out from the hotel, hurrying back to Little Oakfield Street.

These were things she could not understand: she knew only that she had to play her part in them.

"DON'T argue. Go and get a large pork pie." With the admonition, Gees himself got out on the offside of his Rolls-Bentley, and spoke over his shoulder. "Get two bottles of beer too." Then he crossed the street to the post office and entered, while Kyrle went on his errands, meekly.

Within three minutes, Gees heard Miss Brandon's voice.

"We're near the halfway mark," he told her. "What did you dig out of Miss Aylener, please?"

She told him of the finding of the fox fur and suede shoes, not forgetting also to recount Miss Aylener's strange words toward the end of the interview. Gees asked her to repeat them.

"'The Maiden possessed of all, yet whom none may possess'," he repeated back to her. "That's a new one on me, Miss Brandon, and I don't recognize it as belonging to any of the mythologies. But about Miss Aylener—did she say whether she meant to stay in London?"

"I was just going to tell you," she answered. "She telephoned me less than ten minutes ago, to say she was leaving today to return to Brachmornalachan, and asked me to tell you when you rang me."

"Well, Miss Brandon, I want you to keep an eye out for that girl Betty, and give

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her four ten-shilling notes if she turns up and tells you a story of any sort. Be as nice as you can to her, tell her you're acting for me and know all about it, and get out of her just how and why she went to Bristol—if she did. That's all for now. If I'm not back by the end of the week, I'll write to you."

Returning to the car, he found that Kyrle was already in it. Gees took a clasp knife from his pocket before he started the engine.

"Take that, and slice the pie," he bade. "I can eat pie and drive, but first—" he opened one of the bottles Kyrle had put down on the floor, and took a drink from it. "Now for pie and the open road, and when I told you we'd get there before dark I had in mind that it isn't dark till nearly eleven, when you get as far north as that." He engaged gear, and the car moved on.

About an hour later, the second beer bottle went hurtling out from the car and hit the soil of Cumberland. By that time, Kyrle had ceased to press his feet against the floorboards and hold his breath at intervals. They had shaved disaster so many times that he began to feel the crash would be a relief, when it happened.

When they rocked through Gretna, Gees peered at the trip figures on the speedometer and nodded his satisfaction. "Average forty-five, including getting out of London," he remarked. "I doubt whether it's ever been done in the daytime."

"The next time it's done, I'll stay home," Kyrle said. "I take a risk occasionally with my bus, but you—"

"Curse me when we hit something," Gees advised.

"That's a fool challenge to Providence," Kyrle protested, "and a direct hit at this speed won't leave me any time to curse. Oh, carry on! I'm more anxious than you are to get there, but I want to arrive in one piece. And if you average forty the rest of the way, we shall arrive before it gets altogether dark. Ahead of them, I still think."

"Fog," Gees said. "After we leave the main road."

"Weather like this?" Kyrle derided. "Impossible!"

"Quite—if we get there ahead of them," Gees assented. "Otherwise, not in the least impossible. Probable, in fact."

THE sun was setting when he hurtled the car past the inn at which he had had a late lunch on the way to his first meeting with Margaret Aylener, and, when he slowed to turn off the main road, the afterglow had begun to fade out from the western sky. The car rocked along the uneven track, and, as they ran out from between the low walls to open, Kyrle pointed ahead at a saloon car approaching them.

Gees swung aside to let it pass, and they saw that it was empty except for the driver.

"He's beaten us to it," Gees said. "Probably he made Glasgow or Edinburgh by air, and either chartered that car to take him on, or else got to the nearest station and took it from there."

"Then you were right," Kyrle admitted. "All the way I've been afraid it was Helen who went to Bristol. I wouldn't tell you before."

"If I hadn't been sure," Gees said, "I wouldn't have risked my neck and yours in the attempt at beating him to it."

They reached the point where three ways branched, and, a little later, topped the last rise between them and Brachmornalachan.

Kyrle's breath hissed through his teeth as, gazing ahead, he saw a whitish cloud hiding the loch and all the tiny village, thinning to reveal only the ragged copses of evergreens toward the summits of the hills.

"Right about the fog, too," he half groaned. "What'll we do?"

"If you feel in the pocket of that door beside you," Gees said, "you find an automatic pistol small enough to go in your pocket. It's loaded. Do you know how to use it?"

"I do—but you don't think it will come to shooting, surely?"

"I have a great respect for the man we

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are going to see," Gees answered. "That is, for the man I hope we are going to see. I think we need every form of persuasion there is, when we met him. Therefore you'd better pocket the gun. I've got one like it for myself."

Kyrle found the pistol and put it in the right-hand outer pocket of his lounge coat, after which he buttoned the weatherproof he was wearing, for already the car had dipped down to the first thin layers of fog, and there was a chill in the air.

The long twilight of the north was as yet but little advanced, but under the thin, upper strata of mist through which they moved, the greater density which altogether hid Brachmornalachan was a darkness as of utter night.

They dipped another half-mile down the long slope toward the tiny village, sank into a tangibility of blinding wetness, and Gees stopped.

"His devils are out," he said. "You get down and walk by the front end of the off-side wing, to keep us to the road."

Kyrle got out and went round the front of the radiator, and Gees shifted his gear lever into first to move on at a walking pace. Kyrle asked for headlights, bade him dip them, and then asked him to switch them off.

Dipped or level, the lights made a gray wall ahead that reflected the rays back on the car, and without lights the track was more easily discernible in the Hades-gloom to which they had descended.

Presently Kyrle called to Gees to stop, and his voice sounded back faintly through the thickness before he came to stand opposite the driving seat.

"It's no use," he said. "I can't be sure. We may be off the road even now. I think you were right—there must be devils out."

Gees switched off the engine and took out the ignition key, pocketing it. "How far would you say we are from the post office?" he asked.

"Half a mile. A mile—anything. Impossible to tell."

Gees went to the front of the car and dropped to his knees to peer at the ground, went down on his hands and crawled a little way. "It's all right," he said as he stood up again. "We're still on the track. We'll leave the car and go ahead on foot. To The Rowans, first."

"If—if she arrived with him, would he have let her go there?" Kyrle asked.

"No. But Callum may be useful. I was a fool, Kyrle. We ought to have stopped that car we passed, and asked the man in it what passengers he brought here, as well as making sure of the number."

"You did that, then?"

"It's registered in my mind, an easy one to remember. Now let's go. I'll take the rut on the right, and you keep in the one on the left and tell me if you feel you're missing it."

Slowly they went on through the wet, blanketing fog, only just visible to each other as they kept to the wheel tracks, with no more than the width of a vehicle between them.

CHAPTER XV

CREATURES OF THE DARKNESS

PRESENTLY the stone bulk of the post office loomed up on Gees' right, and, passing the vague, unlighted frontage, he sighed relief that they had kept to the right track, not followed other ruts and got themselves lost in this clinging darkness. A little way farther on, Kyrle said:

"It's thinning, Gees. I can see the way, now."

"How's the moon, do you know?" Gees asked with odd abruptness.

"Quite well, thank you," Kyrle answered. "I have an idea it's new either tonight or tomorrow, so it won't be much use to us. Why, did you think it might rise and help us, later on?"

"The dark of the moon," Gees reflected, ignoring the question. "But is it new tonight or tomorrow? You don't know, I suppose?"

"I don't. Nor do I see what difference it makes."

"There is very little darkness here at this time of year—complete darkness, I

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mean," Gees remarked, abandoning the subject of the moon. "And there—yes, that's the wall of The Rowans. Kyrle, isn't that someone by the gate? A woman, too, by the look of it—"

He broke off as Kyrle began running toward the gate, and followed without hurrying his pace.

Twelve hours at the wheel of the Rolls-Bentley, and at such a pace as he had maintained throughout the day, had left him with little surplus energy. He saw the figure by the gate move away, for the fog had thinned to reveal even the outline of the house at this distance, and saw, too, that she moved little less quickly than Kyrle.

They had almost vanished in the haze when their voices came back to him, Kyrle's first, sharply questioning:

"What were you doing there?"

Equally sharp, the rejoinder: "Dinna fret yersel'! 'Tis my ain business." And Gees knew the voice, but could not place it.

Baffled, apparently, Kyrle stood still while her figure grew faint and vanished in the mist. Then he returned to where Gees waited by the gate, and shook his head as if far from satisfied.

"I thought it might have been Helen," he explained, "but it was that woman from the post office. Gralloch, her name is. What the devil would she be doing here at this time of night?"

"Search me," Gees answered, and opened the gate to hold it while Kyrle passed through. He followed, and they went toward the house.

"Yes, but—" Kyrle began but left the words unspoken as Gees pulled at the bell-handle beside the door.

"Going directly away from the post office, at this time of night." Gees looked at his wrist watch as he spoke. The luminous hands pointed to ten minutes past eleven. Then, since his first summons had brought no response, nor produced any apparent movement in the house, he rang again, and before the sound of the bell inside had ceased, the heavy door swung open and revealed Elizabeth, her bare ankles showing from under the edge of her nightdress, which was all but covered by a heavy coat, and her long hair twisted in an untidy bun at the back of her head.

"Ye're ower late," she said drily, with no apparent surprise. She swung the door wide, and by the light of her candle found and pulled down the switch for the lights of the entrance hall. "Wull ye have eggs and bacon?"

The practical directness of the question made Gees smile. Elizabeth evidently went to the heart of things, and knew men's needs.

"Nothing on earth would please me more," he said.

"'Tis quickest," she remarked, and opened the dining room door. But Gees did not move, and Kyrle waited on him. "Elizabeth," he asked, "can you tell me whether new moon is tonight or tomorrow night?"

"By the almanac," she said with no hesitation, "new mune's six-therrty tomorrow night."

"Then there's plenty of time for eggs and bacon," he remarked, and made for the dining room. "And for a rest as well."

KYRLE, following him into the room, asked irritably—"What are you gibbering about? All this about the new moon—what is it?"

"The difference"—Gees pulled the carving chair back from the table at which he had dined with Margaret Aylener, and slumped into it—"between tackling our problem after twelve hours of Hell's own driving, and tackling it fresh. I want grub and a rest, I do."

"What do we do next, then?" Kyrle demanded.

"Personally, I hope she cooks me no less than four eggs," Gees said. "That pork pie wasn't bad, but it was no more than a mere snack. And it was a long while ago, too. If you cast an eye leftward, that decanter we punished some years ago isn't empty, and I spot soda in the syphon.

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As a prospective relative, what about doing the honors?"

Kyrle got up, wearily, and poured two stiff drinks. As he put one tumbler down beside Gees he said: "This is a mere waste of time."

"And of me, and of a perfectly good Rolls-Bentley," Gees retorted. "If you're in such a blasted hurry, go and get busy. New moon is not till six-thirty tomorrow night, and I want all the energy I can raise to face what it means. Therefore"—he lifted his glass—"here's how."

"I'm in your hands," Kyrle said, and drank deeply before he put his tumbler down. "I don't know what it all means."

"And I'm only guessing," Gees told him, "but I think I've guessed right." Elizabeth looked in on them. She hadn't bothered to dress. "Wull ye have tea, or coffee?" she asked from the doorway.

"Coffee, please, the way you know how to make it," Gees answered, without waiting for Kyrle to speak. When she had disappeared, he said: "It must have been that French invasion in the time of Mary Stuart that taught these people how to make coffee—if they had coffee then."

"To the best of my knowledge, they hadn't," Kyrle snapped.

"I'll look it up when I get back," Gees promised. "Probably they hadn't. If Mary and John Knox had drunk coffee together—the sort of coffee Elizabeth makes—history might have been different—"

"Do you realize why we took that drive?" Kyrle interrupted, angrily.

"Why I drove like that, you mean," Gees reminded him. "To beat MacMorn to it—yes. But we didn't beat him. Hence the fog—if you look out, you'll find there isn't any fog, now. I realize that since he beat us to it, there's nothing to be done until— The new moon is nineteen hours away, and we've got to be on hand for it, fresh and fit. That's why I'm all for eggs and bacon, and a sleep."

Kyrle got up, went to the window, and drew a curtain back. He pulled it over the window again, and said: "You're right. No fog at all."

"It was his fog," Gees said. "It didn't stop us, so why keep it on?" He lifted his tumbler, and put it down empty.

"And Helen?"

"I don't even know that Helen is anywhere near here," Gees said.

"You mean—" Kyrle stared at him. "What *do* you mean?"

"I mean I was a fool. I took the number of that car, mentally, and I've still got it in my mind. But I didn't stop the driver and ask him whether he brought one passenger or two to Brachmornalachan."

"But—good Lord, man!" Kyrle began, and stopped.

"Not that it matters much," Gees said. "Fill me another, till she gets here with those eggs," he asked, and held out his glass. "I tell you, Kyrle, we're all in, or next to it, after that drive, and we'll render thanks to all the gods there are that new moon is tomorrow night instead of tonight."

Kyrle was at the sideboard with Gees' glass and his own. Elizabeth appeared with a tray.

"I suppose you haven't seen anything of Miss Helen Aylener today, Elizabeth?" Gees asked.

"Miss Margaret sent a telegram," she answered. "It's the morrow they come back. Callum's to go to rail with the car."

"They?" Kyrle put down the decanter and faced about.

"She'd no leave Miss Helen ahint," Elizabeth told him, ironically.

"Did the woman Gralloch from the post office bring the telegram?" Gees persisted, as she seemed about to retire.

"Nay, she sent a laddie," she answered, bristling. "She'd no show her face at this door while I'm here and Miss Margaret awa'."

"And this fog—have you had it here all day?" he asked.

"Fog?" she echoed, with a hint of incredulity. "Nay, I've seen no fog. 'Twas a clear night when I went to bed."

"Ah! Only a night mist, I expect. Thank you, Elizabeth."

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She got as far as the door of the room, and then flung over her shoulder: "That de'il beyond the loch needed it, maybe."

"JUST a minute, Elizabeth," Gees asked, and she faced about and waited. "Why should he need a fog, and what makes you think he could raise one if he did?"

"I maun mak' beds for ye an' Mr. Kyrle," she answered uneasily.

"Miss Helen has disappeared," he said bluntly. "I think—I believe MacMorn has got her, brought her here tonight."

"Ye *think?* Ye *believe?*"

"We've driven here from London today because of it," Kyrle put in.

"Aye? Trouble for naught. I was fey to his hold on her, long syne. Ye'll no brak' the hold. No man nor wumman can fecht MacMorn and win."

"A cheerful outlook," Gees said. "But you may be wrong, Elizabeth. What's your feud with Bathsheba Gralloch, by the way?"

"Nay, there's no feud," she answered somberly, "but I'm fey to her compact, and she knows it, and keeps awa' from the paths I walk."

"That's talking in riddles," Gees reproved her, and eyed the bacon fat coagulating in the dish. "What compact, and with whom?"

"Wi' the Unseen, to the which she sold her ain blood kin," she answered, broadening her dialect. "I'll say nae mair. I kenned weel, when ye turned yer back on Miss Margaret, ye had sicht o' a' that yon de'il i' his hoose o' sin is maister to, an' that y'd kenned the the shadows i' the mirk. I maun mak' beds—I'll say nae mair."

"Will you tell me why Bathsheba Gralloch sold her own blood kin, as you put it?" he asked.

"Nay," she answered, stubbornly, "for ye'll find it a' i' the hoose o' sin. I'm fey tae ye, and the path ye baith must tread leads there."

She went out, then, and closed the door noisily.

Gees helped himself to the rest of the eggs. "I guess the oracle at Eleusis was about as enlightening," he observed. "Don't mind me, Kyrle—I've gone primitive, and I'm eating all there is, manners or no manners. And according to the oracle, we're booked for an early visit to MacMorn—there can't be more than one 'hoose o' sin' in a place this size. But I wish she'd been more explicit."

"To let you in on a bit of family history," Kyrle said, "Elizabeth has always had a grudge against Helen. She was devoted to Helen's mother, and Helen's mother died in childbirth. So in her stubborn way Elizabeth blames Helen for her mother's death. That's the trouble."

Without replying, Gees ate steadily.

"I shall be most interested to find out what price Bathsheba Gralloch got for her sister," he said. "According to Elizabeth, we shall be able to inspect the invoice in the 'hoose o' sin,' when we get there."

"AREN'T you rather making light comedy out of it?" Kyrle demanded, sharp anger in his voice. "If what you believe about Helen is true, the situation we've got to face hardly calls for funny remarks, surely?"

"The situation," Gees answered soberly, "is as vague as all the rest of this business, and if my remarks sound funny, then your ear's out. And, now, having eaten, I think a sleep's indicated."

"Do you mean to say we've damned near broken our necks to get here, only to go to sleep?" Kyrle barked out.

"If I weren't so sleepy"—Gees broke off to give a stupendous yawn a fair chance—"I'd damned near break your neck in the hope of lamming some sense into you. I underrated MacMorn—he got here first, in spite of my magnificent driving. You can go and call on him in the middle of the night if you like. I won't. I'm for a sleep."

"I'm sorry," Kyrle said frankly. "I just don't understand—any of it. I feel as if I were blanketed away from reality."

"You are," Gees told him. "There's no

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reality in it, from start to finish. It's all mad. And it's only the heroes of romance who go twenty-four hours and then turn up fresh. I can't—I'm human. Me for the hay, and maybe I'll break records and MacMorn too, tomorrow."

"Today, you mean," Kyrle amended. "It's past midnight. She hasn't told us which rooms. I suppose I take the one I usually have, and you see whether she's got the one you had last time ready for you."

He pushed his chair back from the table and got up, just as Elizabeth entered again. Gees too stood up and faced her.

"Wull I call ye?" she asked.

"I shall waken," Gees answered. "I always do, if I set myself a time. Do I go to the room I had before?"

"Aye," she assented, "and Mr. Kyrle knows his. Ye'll need breakfast afore ye go?" This last as if she knew their errand.

"We've given you trouble enough tonight," Gees said.

She smiled, wintrily. "Aye, but 'twill be Callum'll sairve it." She looked at Kyrle, and her lips worked oddly. Then: "Dinna go," she broke out, with harsh forbidding. "Yon warlock's ower strong. Dinna go. The day's nigh when his de'ils'll drag him doun."

"Maybe"—Gees hid the yawn—"I'm one of those devils. And the longer we stay talking, the less sleep we get. I wish there were time to hear all you know, Elizabeth, but there isn't. If you'll show me your room, Kyrle, I'll give you a call when it's time to go."

"And what time will Callum make breakfast?" Elizabeth asked.

"About six, please," Gees answered. "That gives us twelve hours."

They went up to their rooms, while Elizabeth set about clearing the table as if meals in the middle of the night were commonplace at The Rowans.

CALLUM'S sedately respectful "Good morning, sir," when Gees appeared in the dining room just before six o'clock was that of the perfectly trained serving man whom nothing could surprise. He drew out a chair but, waiting for Kyrle, Gees did not immediately take it.

"Mr. Kyrle will be down in a few minutes," he explained. "I suppose you know where we're going, Callum, and why?"

"Elizabeth told me of your arrival last night, sir," Callum answered indirectly, "and the time at which you would want breakfast."

"More than that, I want you to come with us," Gees said.

"I am sorry, sir, but I have to take the car to meet Miss Aylener."

"But you know what has happened to Miss Helen?" Gees asked, in surprise at the flat denial.

Callum looked straight at him. "Do you, sir?" he asked.

Gees had to own privately that he did not. If only he had stopped the car that had passed them the night before, and questioned the driver as to his passengers! He said: "We both know, man!"

"Excuse me, sir." Callum spoke as the servant respectfully putting a guest of the house in his place. "I don't know anything about her. Miss Aylener has wired me to meet a train today, and her orders come first. If anything out of the way had happened to Miss Helen, she would know, surely. I concluded I was to meet them both."

The explanation set Gees thinking. "What time did you get the telegram?" he asked.

"Between six and seven o'clock last night, sir."

"Remember that talk we had at Miss Aylener's request?" Gees demanded.

"It was some days ago, sir," Callum answered, and the manner of the reply indicated that nothing Gees could say would make him change his attitude. "The conditions are quite different, now."

At that moment Kyrle entered, and Gees said no more.

He realized that Margaret Aylener, at the time she sent the telegram, had known

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not only of Helen's disappearance, but of his and Kyrle's setting out in the hope of finding the girl and taking her back from MacMorn's hold. He knew it was useless, trying to persuade Callum to ignore the telegram. That "conditions are quite different, now" had a sinister ring about it.

Elizabeth had openly warned Kyrle to leave MacMorn alone: Callum too appeared to think the quest was hopeless, or else felt that his duty consisted in obeying Margaret Aylener's orders, whatever might happen to her niece.

But that reference to different conditions chilled Gees.

"I don't like this time of day," Kyrle observed. "Everything looks bleak at this hour of the morning. I didn't sleep much, either."

"I will leave you gentlemen to help yourselves," Callum remarked, and went out, closing the door on himself.

Gees carved himself a Gargauntuan slice of ham. Kyrle looked at the piled plate, and shuddered visibly.

"I couldn't eat a breakfast like that," he said.

"Then you can watch me," Gees retorted and began to eat. "I don't know when I shall eat again, so I'm laying in a stock."

"What do you propose to do?" Kyrle asked, sitting with an empty plate before him, and making no move toward filling it.

Without abating any of his interest in ham and scrambled eggs, Gees eyed his companion, and saw dulled, uninterested eyes, and an air of slack inertness. This was a different man from the one who had come to Little Oakfield Street to report Helen's disappearance.

"I propose," Gees answered between mouthfuls, "to spoil MacMorn's game and quite probably spoil him too, before new moon tonight. I propose also to get your Helen out of his house and back here."

"Yes." He sounded as if the statement had little interest for him, and with sudden dismay Gees remembered the incident of the crimson drink that Kyrle, together with Helen, had taken from MacMorn. For this was not the normal Kyrle: it was no more than the shell of him.

"Are you going to help?" Gees barked out the question, harshly.

"Yes. Yes, of course I'm going to help."

A gleam of enthusiasm lighted Kyrle's eyes momentarily, and faded out. Gees finished his breakfast in silence, while Kyrle drank coffee thirstily and ate nothing.

"Now look here, Kyrle." Rising from his seat, Gees went to the younger man and put a hand on his shoulder. "Either you pit your soul as well as the rest of you against MacMorn, or else you don't go. I'd sooner tackle it alone than have you as a drag on me. It's your Helen who is in danger of death and worse, so what about it?"

"Yes, man—yes!" A brief enthusiasm again flamed in Kyrle's expression. "I'll go through Hell to save her. Do we go now?"

"We do. Have you got that gun ready to your hand?"

"All ready, and loaded. Only to pull the safety catch off."

"Right. Keep your wits about you. Let's go."

CHAPTER XVI

BLOOD-RED NECTAR

"THE path we both must tread leads there, according to Elizabeth," Gees remarked to Kyrle standing in the doorway of The Rowans. The sun was still low in the east, and its rays slanted across his face. Quartering from behind the house, a wind with the tang of the sea in it bent the rowan branches so that they tossed like plumes on the heads of prancing horses.

Halfway up the slope out from the valley the abandoned Rolls-Bentley looked like a child's toy with the sunrays glinting on its chromium. Gees pulled at the bell-handle, and took his ignition key from his pocket as Callum opened the

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door he had just closed on the pair of them.

"I don't think it's going to keep fine very long, and when we had to leave my car last night I didn't stay to put the hood up," Gees said. "We've no time to spare now, so I wonder if you'd be so good as to take this key and drive the car into the garage at the back?"

"Certainly, sir." And Callum took the key.

With a word of thanks Gees led off along the drive, and Kyrle went with him, along the path Elizabeth had foretold they must tread toward MacMorn's squat, gray house beyond the loch.

A vanguard of fleecy little clouds scurried eastward across the sky, and behind them came heavier masses, dark-bodied. The wind that struck on their backs and drove them on raised waves on the loch, and by the time they reached the soggy soil near its brink, heavy, fast-driving clouds had blotted out the sun, so that the water was gray and sullen-looking; Brachmornalachan lay in gloom.

Up on the hillsides the tortured firs bent in the suddenly risen gale, the sound of which was like the trampling feet of a distant army.

When they passed the lone monolith between the loch and MacMorn's house, Gees looked up at the worn lines carved near its top, and the racing clouds gave an illusion that the pillar swayed against the sky, as the moon may seem to travel across the heavens when scud drives before its half-obscured face.

The prisonlike frontage of the house before them revealed no sign of life within. At its eastern end the thorn tree, sheltered from the main force of the wind, shivered ever and again as a curving blast struck on it, and the last of its crimson petals fluttered, faded, to add their substance to the red carpet that hid the ground under its branches.

"The *hoose o' sin*," Gees remarked. "The description fits it, I think."

"What do you propose to do inside?" Kyrle asked.

"Get your future wife out of his hold," Gees answered. "We may have trouble over it, and in fact I think we shall. Trouble of some sort. Where are you carrying that automatic?"

"Right-hand trouser pocket. It sits flat against my leg."

"Handy for a draw—yes. I hope it doesn't come to that."

Abruptly he grasped Kyrle's arm with his left hand, and, as Kyrle turned his head in surprise to ask his reason, laid the forefinger of his right hand against his lips.

Kyrle obeyed and kept silence. Gees, perhaps because he was more sensitive to the presence of such beings as MacMorn could control, or perhaps because he had not drunk of MacMorn's crimson fluid, which Helen had admitted had affected her and which Kyrle too had tasted, had realized that they were no longer alone.

Things, not even tangible enough to be visible as shadows, eddied about them on the wind and became perceptible to his inner consciousness. Eaverdroppers for MacMorn?

He was over strong, Elizabeth had said. Within this circle, Gees knew, he was master as well as maker of shadows, and of strength to which they might even add by discussion of their purpose with him.

HERE, with the bulk of the house to oppose its charge, the wind hummed a deep, angered protest. Before Gees and Kyrle gained the shelter of the deep doorway, a flurry of rain struck on them, and Gees looked back to see his car moving slowly toward The Rowans with its hood up.

Gees advanced to the door and struck twice with the bronze knocker.

With an upsetting promptness, MacMorn himself opened for them and stood back with a smile of invitation.

"Good morning," he said cordially. "*Not* a very good one, I fear. Will you come in? I am glad to welcome you to my house."

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They entered, Kyrle with perceptible eagerness, and Gees, following him, taking in the character of the house, alive to the influence of immense age which it radiated as soon as he set foot inside.

They stood in a corridor not more than six feet in width, running transversely to the frontage.

MacMorn closed the outer door, and Gees saw that the inner side of the house wall was plain, bare stone, as was the outside. It looked as if this outer wall were a shell enclosing another building. and the wall that he faced on entering was of wood, shining and black with age.

In a swift glance that he took at the door as he waited for MacMorn's guidance, Gees could see no fastening of any sort, nor any projection by which to pull the door open. A latch of some sort may have clicked, but, not expecting any peculiarity about the door, Gees had not heard it, or perhaps the sound had made no impression on his consciousness.

The humming of the wind, deadened to some extent by the thickness of the wall, came to his ears in the brief interval before MacMorn spoke again. He felt that he ought to have been more observant about that door. As nearly as he could see, they could not get out of the house again until MacMorn chose to let them.

"An early hour for a call," MacMorn said, "but all hours are alike to me. I half expected that you would call last night."

"We arrived much too late," Gees said.

"And no doubt were tired, after so long and hard a drive," MacMorn observed with friendly solicitude. "But before I show you my house or offer you refreshment, I wish to tell you, Mr. Kyrle, that your future wife is not in my hold, as you appear to think."

The exact words, Gees reflected, that he himself had used just before he bade Kyrle keep silence. "Future wife," and "hold"—the significance of the statement was unmistakable.

Then, as Kyrle stared at him open-mouthed, he spoke again: "And while you are my guest, I must ask you to remove the automatic pistol from your right-hand trousers pocket. Otherwise, with your entirely unfounded suspicion of me, I should not feel quite safe. As my guest, I hope you will see that the request is not unreasonable."

Sheepishly, Kyrle took out the pistol and held it out for MacMorn to take, while Gees wanted to shout at him to keep it but could not. In some way, material or uncanny, their talk as they neared the house had been overheard. How far, Gees asked himself, did MacMorn's prescience extend? No visible agency for the transmission of their talk had been near them when Kyrle had said the pistol was in that pocket.

"No," MacMorn said, "I will not take it. I do not understand those things. If you put it down on the floor here, beside the door, you can recover it before you go. It will not be touched; I assure you."

Kyrle put the pistol down, and, reluctantly, Gees let it stay there.

"YOU will forgive my small eccentricity, I know." MacMorn smiled at them both, quite friendlily. "And now what shall we do? Would you care to see the house, or talk a while?"

He sounded bafflingly cordial. Gees said, rather grimly: "We are in your hands."

"Ah! Then if you will come this way, please—"

And, turning, he led to the right along the corridor, toward the eastern end of the house, and opened a door in the inner wall by the simple expedient of pushing at its surface, on which was no more sign of a fastening than on that of his front door.

This one swung inward soundlessly, and revealed a room panelled in black, old wood, softly carpeted, and furnished with low divans covered and cushioned in dark green, and with little, ebony three-legged stools and tables.

There was a breast-high shelf opposite the doorway, and on it stood an array of bottles and decanters and glasses. Light,

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only just strong enough to reveal these things, entered through apertures in the ceiling, one at each corner, and Gees surmised an arrangement of reflecting mirrors on the roof of the house.

"This was where you brought Helen —Miss Aylener and me, when we came to see you before," Kyrle said with a certain eager appreciation of his surroundings.

"I believe it is—yes," MacMorn assented. "Do sit down." He pointed at the divan nearest to his two guests. "You too, Mr. Green."

"We seem to be losing sight of our purpose in coming here," Gees said quietly, and did not move. "It was—not a friendly purpose, as you seem to assume.

"But before we even go so far as to sit down, I want to tell you—on our way here, we met the car which brought you and one other to this house yesterday afternoon, so your statement that Mr. Kyrle's future wife is not in your hold does not impress me in the way you intended it should. I may tell you, too, that I saw you in London."

MacMorn seated himself very deliberately on one of the little ebony stools, and smiled, quite unruffled.

"I have told you," he said, speaking very slowly, "that Miss Aylener, Mr. Kyrle's future wife, is not in my hold, and it appears that you do not believe me.

"Since we are to understand each other fully before I can offer you entertainment of any kind, or before you go, answer me one question. Did the driver of the car I hired yesterday describe my companion of the journey to you?"

As, voicing the question, he gazed at Gees directly, the little specks of fire that had appeared in his eyes when they had talked before over the incident of the black goat appeared again. The question itself revealed that his apparent omniscience was only apparent. He did not realize that Gees had not so much as spoken to the driver of the car.

"He did not," Gees answered, truthfully enough. "It was not necessary. You see, I know who went to Bristol."

FOR a fraction of a second, just long enough for Gees to see that the shot had gone home, MacMorn's expression betrayed fear. Recovering his composure quickly, he gazed up from his stool at Gees, steadily.

"I will not pretend to ignorance of things I know," MacMorn said, as deliberately as when he had spoken before. "I do know, and how I know does not concern you, that you two men drove here from London yesterday, and since I overheard that you intended to get Mr. Kyrle's future wife out of my hold, I conclude that you accuse me of kidnaping her.

"I assure you that she is not here. Bring as large an army as you like, and you have my full permission to search the house and prove for yourselves that she is not. As for my companion on the journey here, if you will excuse me for a minute, I will see if she can receive you and assure you that she accompanied me yesterday."

He stood up as he ended his statement, and, without waiting for either of them to speak, went out by the door by which they had entered the room. It opened outward at his touch; evidently it swung both ways, but when it had closed on him and Gees tried to push it open again, it would not yield. There was some trick in its fastening.

"Then we're prisoners?" Kyrle said, dully.

With his forefinger on his lips, Gees turned to him. "It doesn't pay to say too much, or even to think too much, here," he said.

Kyrle went to the shelf and stood looking at its array of glassware, and Gees inspected, one after another, the four apertures in the ceiling through which light was admitted to the room, to see the sky reflected in angled mirrors.

When his gaze ranged over objects in the room again, he realized how very little light the apertures really gave. It was no more than a twilight, for which their eyes had been prepared by the greater gloom of the corridor from which they had entered here with MacMorn.

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"Is it all a mistake of yours?" Kyrle asked abruptly.

"We shall know better by seven o'clock tonight," Gees answered.

"Why—do you mean we shall be kept here till then? Must you talk in riddles all the time?"

"Because I don't know all the solution," Gees answered. "If you choose to go—well, there's nothing more to be said. And we've already said far too much for my liking, as it is."

The gloom in which they waited was heaviest in the middle of the room, farthest from the lighting apertures. There, Gees either saw or imagined, the faintest of mists was rising, an emanation that spread out as might smoke from a chimney into still air. He was not sure whether his eyes were tricking him until Kyrle spoke again:

"Scent," he said. "I didn't smell any when we came in."

Gees too smelt it, then, and knew that what he had seen was no illusion, but some trick of MacMorn's for which the reason would declare itself sooner or later. It was a sweet, heady scent, sensuously alluring.

Gees tried to resist its influence on him, but Kyrle inhaled, open-mouthed and deeply, and laughed aloud.

"It's divine!" he exclaimed. "It's like that drink he gave us."

HE DROPPED back on the divan nearest to him and lay back among its cushions with closed eyes, luxuriating in the influence of the scent. With angry disgust at his weakness, Gees turned to the door and pushed at it, exerting all his strength, but in vain.

And the strange, sweet scent was sapping his power of thought, assailing his will. Did he want so much to escape from it, in reality?

"My companion of yesterday is tired after her long journey. I have asked her to receive you both, and in a few minutes we will go to her. Then you may hear from her own lips that she accompanied me here."

It was MacMorn who spoke, deliberately and quietly. Gees swung around from the immovable door and saw that all the walls of the room were solid-seeming as when he had entered, nor had there been sound or sign of a door opening anywhere.

Yet there stood MacMorn, a yard or so away from the corner opposite Gees and the door, and Kyrle had opened his eyes and sat up on the divan, though with no appearance of surprise. He looked like a man half-drugged, Gees realized.

"And where in Beelzebub's name did you spring from?" Gees exclaimed.

MacMorn shook his head in reproof, and the little sparks gleamed momentarily in his eyes. "That is not a name to speak carelessly in this house, as you should know," he said. "But I forget. Before I take you both to see my companion of yesterday—"

Without ending the sentence, he turned to the shelf at the back of the room and ranged three small glasses, and, as Gees watched him, took a bottle of clear fluid, removed its glass stopper, and from it half filled each of the glasses.

Restoring it to its place on the shelf, he took another bottle of colorless content and from it filled each glass nearly to its brim, and the change that Helen had described took place.

In each glass the contents foamed up pinkly, though not to the point of overflowing, and as the effervescence subsided and cleared away, the three fluids showed a deep, rich crimson.

MacMorn took one glass and handed it to Kyrle, who took it without question, eagerly. Then, taking up the other two, MacMorn advanced to where Gees watched him, and held out one glass.

He said: "I want us all to drink to our better understanding," and waited while Gees hesitated.

THE heady allure of the scent was reason-destroying, a reinforcement to the friendly invitation. All Gees could think for the moment was that he had watched MacMorn pour all three drinks

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from the same bottles, and thus, if the stuff had a drugging effect, it would act on them all.

He wished he had thought to ask Kyrle or Helen if all three of them had drunk together on that other occasion, but knew he could not put such a question, now. MacMorn's fire-flecked black eyes were hypnotically compelling, and, though a sixth sense told him he ought not to touch the glass, Gees resisted the prompting and took it with his left hand.

As he did so, the sleeve retracted from his wrist, showing the dial of his watch, with the hands at ten minutes past nine.

"It's early to start this sort of thing," he said, in final, uselessly faint resistance. "And I think we already understand each other quite well."

MacMorn lifted his glass high, and the crimson fluid showed ruby-clear against the shaft of light in the corner behind him. "To our better understanding," he said, and Kyrle stood up away from the divan and echoed, "Better understanding," on which MacMorn put his glass to his lips and emptied it at a draught.

Then Gees too drank, but without echoing the toast, and felt the drink as a limit of ecstasy as he put the glass down on an ebony table beside him. Involuntarily, facing MacMorn as he stood, he closed his eyes, and felt that he lived through limitless years of joyous strength.

For a brief interval the warning sense that had bidden him refuse the drink insisted that he must be on his guard, held him to his distrust of MacMorn, and then it dulled to sleep.

The man was a magician, but a splendid magician; he had said with obvious sincerity that Helen Aylener was not here, that he was not responsible for her disappearance, and had offered to show them the one who had accompanied him here. The almost invisible mist with which the scent had first become perceptible had thickened so that the room was in a haze: Kyrle half-reclined among the cushions of the divan, smiling, his eyes shut.

The whole affair was monstrous, devilish! MacMorn had tricked them as easily as if they had been children. Gees opened his lips to damn the man for his black art, but all he said was:

"A magic compound, your drink."

Thus the sense of it, but he knew he was speaking in a language he had never spoken before, never heard before. There were two of him, the sane, practical self of everyday, and this new self which spoke with tongues, felt at one with MacMorn, and felt, too, an immeasurable vitality with which his normal self was shut from expression.

"Let us go," MacMorn said, and Gees knew that he too spoke in the odd, musical-sounding, unknown yet known language. "I will prove to you that your suspicions were wrong," and he went toward the door.

"But Kyrle is to come too," Gees found sanity enough to question.

"When he wakens," MacMorn dissented. "It is you whom I must convince."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

NEW YEAR'S EVE . . . 1999

How will the turn of the century be celebrated? What will the world be like? How will people act and look? Will strange beings from distant planets join in the celebrations? . . . . . ***Will there be anything left to celebrate?*** One startling version of what might take place is told by **Garret Smith** in an unusual, thrilling, fantastic yarn entitled, **"On the Brink of 2000."** ***Get a new thrill!*** . . . Read this classic of imagination in the **January** issue of

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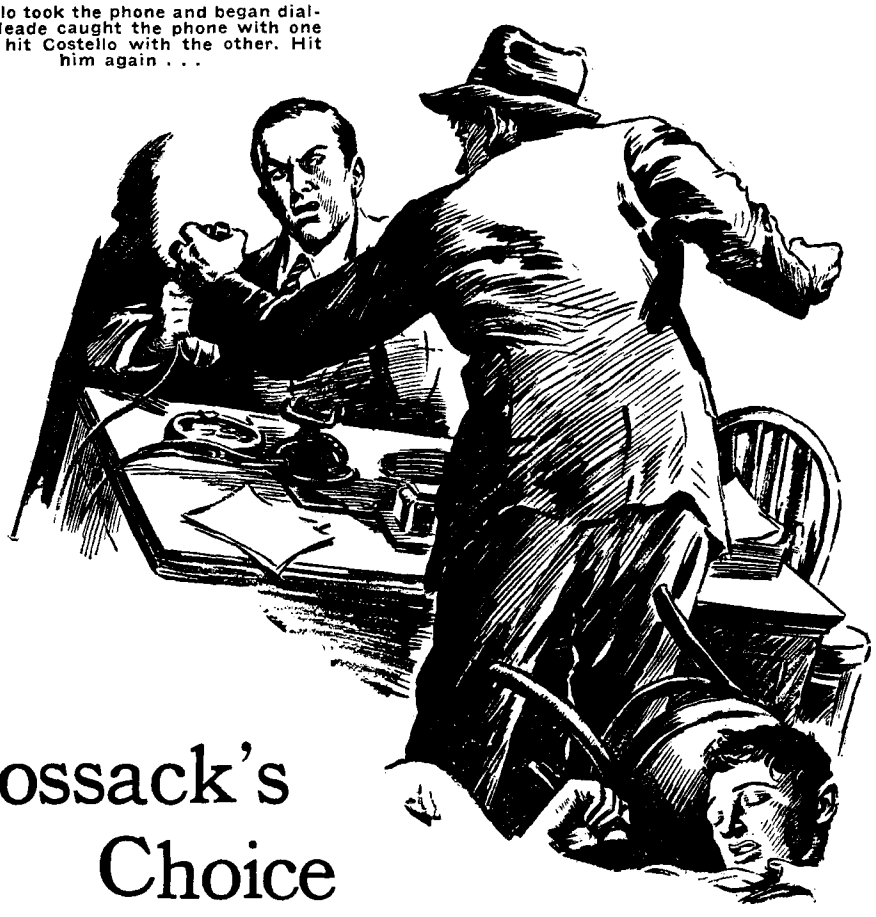
Costello took the phone and began dialing. Meade caught the phone with one hand, hit Costello with the other. Hit him again . . .



Cossack's Choice

So you're just a cop. You put in your time and you do your job; and when the picture stands out clear in its pretty little frame, you take your choice. Think twice about that

By SAMUEL W. TAYLOR

Author of "Doubt," "Outlaw Dog," etc.

MEADE got home some time after midnight. He left his car in the driveway and walked across what had been the lawn. The dry weeds snapped under his shoes.

On the porch he lurched forward on stooping for the newspaper, but caught himself on the iron railing, straightened. He pulled a hand across his eyes and stood a moment before going inside.

He crossed in the dark to the fireplace mantle, found a flask and unscrewed the cap. He turned with the bottle in one hand and the cap in the other as the floor lamp came on.

Nan was at the end of the sofa by the lamp. She had cleared a space to sit among the newspapers, dirty shirts, playing cards, tobacco ash and butts. She was striking in such surroundings with an evening gown of white silk crepe and a skunk boxcoat.

Her sleek coiffure had a live sheen under

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the light. She had wide-spaced eyes and full red lips. She stood up, saying, "Oh, Lee."

"Hello, Nan," he said cautiously. He was tall, built well. Sight of the girl had driven the blood from his face. His suit was a sack and his shirt was dirty.

"Lee, I wouldn't have bothered you except that I'm nearly wild about Pete. The police and the sheriff and everybody are all so satisfied with their minds made up; and I knew that whatever else, you were good at your job and could dig into things and— Have you heard about Pete?"

Meade took a drink from the bottle, looked at the label as he screwed the cap on, put the bottle on the mantel. He said, "Yes, I heard about Pete. But I'm not on the case."

"Lee, you're bitter." She crossed to him and stood looking up, letting her physical appeal weight her words.

"Sure I am. And I'm not on the case."

"Lee, I talked to Pete. He doesn't know a thing about it. He was tight in the Cairo and he went out to the car and went to sleep. He never even started the car."

She took hold of his lapels. "Lee, you look awful. Are you just letting go? I don't want you to take things this way. Lee, you know I'd do anything to help you—"

"I can't do anything about Pete. He was driving lousy drunk, ran off the road into a parked car and killed a man named Diamond who was in the car. Broke his neck. Pete was still asleep when he was found. And it was sleep. He didn't have a bump on him. It's open and shut, Nan. I can't help you."

"Lee, I talked with Pete—"

"He's your brother."

Her hands came off his lapels and groped the skunk coat closer around her neck. She said, "All right, Lee," in a small voice and turned for the door.

"I'll look into it," he said.

She came around with her eyes alight. Her volatile aliveness had always made her, to him, infinitely desirable. "Lee, I knew you'd believe us. I knew you'd do something—"

"Save it." His lips smiled without parting. "This is good. After all the fuss because I was a Cossack—and now you come to me *because* I am a Cossack."

"You're bitter, Lee. You've never tried to see my side. Then you'll do what you can?"

"I said I'd look into it. And you'd better scram out of here. Any snoop who spots you here can claim we're living together and spike the divorce."

MEADE talked with his boss next morning. "Okay," Sheriff Young agreed. The sheriff was a heavy man who liked the traditional big hats and patent-leather boots. "But I don't see why you want a piece of this."

"Nan wants me to look into it."

"I thought you were getting over her."

"I'll take a look at Pete." Meade went upstairs to the cell block. Pete was in cell number three. He was twenty years old, husky, with sandy hair and eyes like Nan.

"Hello, Cossack," Pete said. He was sitting on the iron bed and didn't get up.

"Hello. I'm looking into things."

"Go ahead and look. I'll do my talking to my lawyer."

"Who is he?"

"Find out."

"You're making it easy."

Pete spat on the floor. "Listen, Cossack, you're not fooling me any. I been framed, and I know why. I was making too much work for you boys, so you said, 'We'll just stick the lad away to cool a spell.'

"And you ain't any different on account of Nan. She's getting rid of you anyhow and maybe this is one way you can get even, through me."

Meade went downstairs. Sheriff Young's heavy face looked up from the desk with a question. Meade shook his head.

Adams, a fellow deputy, was in the office. He said to Meade: "It's funny, your wife wanting you to work on this—her asking your help as the law when she's divorcing you on account of you won't quit the law." Adams began a chuckle, checked it on seeing the sheriff's glance.

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"Ye-ah," Meade said. "I laughed all night."

Meade telephoned Nan that evening. "I've been digging around and I scratched up some stuff. Pete told you the truth."

"Oh, that's marvelous!" Some of that vibrant something that was Nan came even over a wire. "Lee, I don't know how to thank you."

"You'd better wait. Pete's still in jail. All I got was a whisper." His voice took on an edge. "You know, a word from a stool pigeon. And I've just gone through the regular dumb brutal routine."

"Lee, let's not fight at a time like this. Don't quote Pete to me. I'm so thankful you've got him free."

"He isn't free. I've got to prove what I know."

"Of course. But that's just routine."

"Oh, sure," he said dryly. "Just a detail."

"What are you going to do?"

"There are a hundred ways to bust a case. I'm on my way now to try one of the easy ones."

THE Cairo was outside the city limits in the east foothills. It was a low, rambling stucco place with big windows looking out on a spotlighted garden.

There was a lot of red rock masonry in the garden, some cement benches outside the spotlights. The lights centered on a claret fountain.

The barroom and dine-dance room were in separate structures connected by an archway. Painted plaster mummy cases were set around in corners and the walls were done with fake hieroglyphics. Waiters and barkeeps affected fezzes, silk blouses and sashes.

Meade went around the horseshoe bar and found Tony Costello in the archway between bar and dining room, watching the floor show. Bender was with Costello.

"Not bad," Meade said, watching. "And you've got a good crowd tonight, Tony."

"Thanks, Lee. Have a drink?"

"I'm just walking around. What do you know about the Diamond affair?"

"The man Pete Spencer ran into and killed? Say, that's too bad about Pete. A nice boy. Hot-headed—well, you know that—but a nice boy. He was around here last night. I said hello, is all. I didn't see him go."

"That's right," Bender said. "We didn't see him go." Bender was a huge young fellow with little ears and eyes and a little tight mouth. Costello was slender, dark, dapper, with white teeth and bland brown eyes.

"Funny about Pete," Costello said. "All that trouble he made you people agitating strikes and so on. And then you get him on an accident." Costello laughed.

"Nobody was trying to get him, if that's what you mean."

"Sure, I didn't mean anything like that, Lee."

"What did you mean?"

Costello's brown eyes became utterly bland and shallow. "What do you want, Lee?"

"What do you know about that business?"

"Not a thing, Lee."

"I wonder what you got in the back room?"

"You can raid it to find out. I still don't know a thing."

"That's right," Bender said. "We don't know a thing."

"I'm just walking around," Meade said. He went to the bar and asked for rye. He was pouring the fourth shot when Gail said beside him, "Making up for lost time?"

"Go ahead, reform me," he growled; but softened, and finally smiled, looking at her. She was smiling her baby smile with its dimples and wrinkled nose and it was impossible not to smile back.

Gail Richards looked sixteen but had to be eight years older. She was a blonde with big blue eyes. Her *Outside The News* column was acid-sharp.

"Are we going to drink that lunch, darling?" she asked.

"I'm sorry. I forgot about that lunch date."

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"You're only nine hours late. We'll call it dinner."

THEY went into the dining room. The floor show was over and couples were dancing. With dim lights, potted palms, low ceiling, Costello had achieved an air of intimacy in the big room. They danced after ordering.

"Of course this makes me feel swell," Gail said as they danced.

"What?"

"You said it was all washed up between you and Nan."

"It is."

"Then what are you doing, digging around in the Diamond case?"

"Job."

"May I utter the word 'nuts'? Everybody knows young Pete Spencer was overdue for this. He never could learn to hold his liquor, but he surely was trying to learn. It's a simple case of drunk driving, which ought to make it manslaughter at the worst."

"I don't think he was driving that car."

"Because Pete is Nan's brother. That's my gripe. After all that happened, you jump like a trained pup when she speaks."

"Rub it in."

"Lee, you die so hard. Can't you see it's always been hopeless between you and Nan? Not just because she was on a picket line and you had a shield when you met. If she'd been a woiking goil, okay; but a theorist, an intellectual pink, daughter of a university professor known for his so-called liberalism—no.

"That kind stand off, well-fed and cloistered, with little pat diagrams of Utopia. All her life Nan thought a cop was some sort of missing link between ape and—"

"Cossack is the name for it, but let's drop it."

"No, I won't. I'm going to unload. Look at the shape you're in! And whose fault is it? You never used to hit the bottle. You were so clean-looking and spruce—"

"You're not helping any." He smiled with lips thin and teeth together.

"Look: all the trouble between Nan and me was over my job. I was a Cossack. Sometimes heads got busted, so I was a head-buster. And so on. That broke us up. I either had to quit or she'd leave. Okay. And now this thing about Pete comes up. She asks for help."

"So you leap to the rescue and everything's peaches and cream," Gail finished for him. "That's what you think. You're dead wrong and you won't see it. Granted my eyes are green—I can still see things and you can't.

"Nan isn't an orphan. The family is still there. And when the trouble is over they'll all go back to their little pat diagram of Utopia. Cossacks don't fit the diagram."

"Let's drop it. Anyhow, Pete's her brother."

"I guess I don't treat you shabbily enough, darling." Gail tried to make a crack out of it, but there were tears in her big baby eyes.

FIVE weeks later Pete's case came up and the lawyers began fighting over the jury. On a Thursday evening Meade went to Nan's house. He was leaner, more slouchy. Before ringing the bell he took a quick pull at a flask.

Nan's father answered the door. He was a tall gray man with a pince-nez, and there was no hint now of that calm air of superiority that had been so rasping to the nerves.

"Lee, have you got anything new?" he asked. "We've got to do something, Lee. Anything. Peter is innocent. Lee, you can't leave a stone unturned. Every resource of the law—"

His hand was on Meade's shoulder as they went into the library. Nan and her mother advanced to shake hands and smile and usher Meade to a chair and ask if he wanted a drink. It had never been like this before. He'd never been a part of the family.

"We had to see you, Lee," Nan was saying. "Pete is going on trial. They're going to try him."

"Things look bad for Pete."

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"You told me you knew he wasn't driving the car!"

"Sure, but you can't prove a whisper in court. I know all about the case. Diamond was killed and then this fake accident was rigged to cover it. Pete happened to be in the wrong place at the right time, and the boys who killed Diamond used him as a red herring. Pete was asleep."

"You know actually who did all this?" the father demanded. "But—Lee! Surely the resources of the law, the methods and devices open and covert— This is my son, and he is innocent, and he is going on trial for manslaughter!"

"There's a hundred ways to bust a case," Meade said wearily. "I've used most of them. Sometimes it takes a hundred and one. What I know doesn't cut any ice in the sheriff's office because Pete is my brother-in-law. I've got to prove it."

"The man who gave you the information. He could be forced to testify—"

"How—by the third degree?" Meade said, almost snarling as an old point of the conflict came near the surface.

Then he shrugged. "It's just a tip from a stool. I know it's right, but after all it's hearsay and no good in court. Anyhow, I've got to protect my stools—at all costs. That's part of this game.

"I'm doing my best but I can't promise anything. I worked eight months on that Morgan case that made all the headlines. Every man in the office knew the details of that case from A to Z, but there never was an arrest. The papers were riding us, an election was coming up; but there wasn't an arrest.

"It's a question of hanging it on somebody. That's the big job. That's why Pete's in a hole. Everything fits and they're hanging it on him."

Meade opened the library door and said without turning: "I'm going to play another angle tonight. It might and might not work."

Nan said, "Lee." He turned, and she began saying something but broke and began crying into her hands. He went out quickly.

MEADE had a glass of beer with Adams, a fellow deputy. Adams was a bulky man of middle age with a pitted nose and a pot belly.

"You're a chump," Adams advised.

"Everybody's guessing it. But it's got a bare chance and I'll protect you. If it works, it's our idea. If it don't, then you don't know a thing. All you know is that I told you I was working a rib and you agreed to say a line into a phone."

"Lee, you're a nice lad and you'll go a long way if you watch your step. Leave this alone, boy. You can't pull a raw one like this. Not with Costello. He'll bust you, Lee. He'll bust you so flat you'll be too thin for wallpaper. Try something else."

"Nothing else left."

They went to the Cairo. A waiter said Costello was in the office. Meade left Adams at the bar and was entering the dining room when Gail took hold of his sleeve. He asked, "Live here?"

"Lined up some chit-chat and just leaving. That's your cue, you know, to ask me to stay."

"All right, stay. You'll have a story in a little while."

"Big one?"

"Maybe big, maybe little. Depending on whose neck takes it."

He crossed through the big low room, through a door, along a short hall, and went in Costello's office. Costello was cashing a check for a waiter. He counted out bills from a tin box, put the check in the box and the box in the wall safe. The waiter went out.

Costello said, "Hello, Lee." Bender's big frame was slouched in a bent-pipe chair. His little tight mouth opened enough to say, "Hello."

Costello said, "Let's go out and have a drink, Lee."

"I want to talk about the Diamond affair," Meade said. He twisted the bolt of the door. Bender got half out of the bent-pipe chair, sat down at Costello's gesture. "Privacy," Meade said. "I understand this place is soundproof, and I don't want anybody busting in."

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Costello sat behind his desk, bouncing his fingertips together. His brown eyes were bland. "Well, Lee, I've told you all I know about that. But I'll tell you again."

"Let me tell you," Meade said. "This guy Diamond dropped a pile on your back room and gave you a rubber check. He was a smart guy and he told it around how smart he was, because you couldn't collect on a check like that or do anything about it.

"He even had the nerve to show up here again. You called him in the office here and something happened. Sure, it was an accident, but his neck was busted."

Costello started to say something, but Meade shook his head.

"Wait. You stood to get closed up or take a stretch. You couldn't just toss him in a ditch, because people knew about the rubber check. You went out for a drink, to figure something, and saw young Pete Spencer trying to get outside a quart of Scotch.

"Maybe you slipped him a Mickey or maybe you didn't, but Pete barely got out to his car and went to sleep. Your idea was that if the sheriff was looking at Pete he wouldn't be looking at you. You had nothing against Pete."

BENDER began coming up from the bent-pipe chair. Costello said, "Sit down." And to Lee: "Quite a story." He sat bouncing his fingertips together, with his eyes bland and shallow.

"It was easy to make Diamond's busted neck look like an accident by running Pete's car into Diamond's."

"Of course," Costello said. "What are you after, Lee—written confessions?"

"They'll do."

The dapper man glanced sidewise at Bender, and burst out laughing. Bender began laughing.

Meade said, "I'm not kidding anybody."

"You don't mean seriously— Oh, really, Lee, you're smarter than that. What do you want, a little political contribution? You've heard a whisper that some money changes hands in my back room—"

"This is no shakedown. I came about the Diamond affair. You cheap two-bit rat. It doesn't mean a thing to you that a kid like Pete Spencer is taking that rap. It don't bother you a bit."

"I guess you'd better beat it," Costello said. "I can bust you for this crude stuff, Lee. Maybe I will if you don't hold your mouth right. A man in my position has got to have a name for being square. If you've been talking this around, I'll bust you.

"Why, you poor miserable bum, why don't you take a bath and put on a clean shirt? You're all shot to pieces and hitting the bottle because your wife walked out on you, and finally you go haywire and come in here trying to frame me so that you can spring your wife's brother and get her back again. Get out of here, you busted-down tosspot. I'm liable to be getting sore."

Lee Meade's face was gray and without expression. He said in a guttural monotone: "I'm getting what I came after."

Costello's bland brown eyes went to Bender. The big man got up deliberately from the bent-pipe chair and started towards Meade.

"Sit down," Meade said.

Bender paused a moment. The tip of his tongue appeared at his tight little mouth. Then he came with a rush, smashing one big fist.

Meade went inside the blow, taking the wrist with the side of his head, and hit Bender in the middle.

Bender brought a knee up for the groin. Meade grabbed the leg and kept it coming up. Bender twisted in mid-air as he went backwards, caught himself with his hands spatting sharply on the polished floor.

He gathered himself and lunged. Meade hit the butting head with the barrel of his service revolver. The big man's weight knocked Meade over and bore him down. He rolled Bender off and stood up, putting the revolver away.

"I FEEL sorry for you, Lee," Costello said. He was sitting behind his desk, bouncing his fingertips together. "You'll

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be surprised how different things are going to be without a badge on your vest. When things happen to a drunken bum who's been broke off the force, nobody cares. You've got things coming, Lee."

"I'm getting what I came after, Tony."

Costello picked up the hand phone and began dialing. Meade sprawled over the desk, taking the phone in one hand and hitting Costello with the other.

Costello went back in the swivel chair, caught his toes under the desk, came forward, and Meade hit him again.

Costello scrambled out of the chair and made for the door. Meade caught him there, pulled him half around and hit him.

Costello spun as if geared to the wall and lit in the corner. Meade began saying something but didn't finish.

Costello came out of the corner with a short knife in his right hand. Meade grabbed for the wrist and caught it, but his fingers sprang open as the knife hit his forearm. He took a step backwards.

Costello crouched there with his white teeth showing and his eyes wide.

"Come on, Lee."

Meade got out his revolver. "Put that thing away."

"Get out of here."

"I'm going to shoot your elbow away if you don't put that thing away. You won't look human when I get through with you."

Costello put the knife away. His smile was crooked because his lips were swelling. "All right, Lee. You want me to write something? What should I say?"

"Tell it in your own words."

"Sure, Lee." Costello went to the desk, sat down, took a pen and tried it on a sheet of paper; shook the pen, opened a drawer, brought a revolver instead of an ink bottle into view, and shot.

Meade's shot was a trifle quicker. Costello's swivel chair turned a quarter way around. His revolver fell onto the rubber mat around the desk. He looked sideways down his nose at his right shoulder, touched the shoulder tentatively with the fingers of his left hand.

He said quietly after a bit: "Now I can't write."

"Tell it to me and I'll write it down. You'll be able to sign in a little while."

Costello got out a cigarette with his left hand and relaxed a few moments. Meade said over his shoulder, "Don't try it"; and Bender, who had been getting up, weaved to his bent-pipe chair and sat down, feeling of his head.

Costello said as he ground out the cigarette butt: "It happened about how you figured. We had Diamond in here about that check and Bender hit him just once. It didn't look hard—"

"It was a love tap," the big man growled.

"But somehow it broke Diamond's neck. Maybe it was the way he fell. We wanted to get rid of the stiff without a fuss, and we saw a way to make it look like Pete did it while driving drunk. Who squealed to you, Lee?"

"A little bird."

"Wait'll I find that bird," Bender said.

"Write it down, Lee," Costello said. "I guess I can sign it."

"I don't want to waste good paper," Meade said. "You've got your shoulder to prove I came in and got tough. And it's two against one. That paper wouldn't be worth a nickel, and you know it. All you want to do is get out of here. You figure I'm washed up the minute you get out."

"What *are* you after, then?" Bender growled. Costello asked the same question with his bland eyes.

"I got what I come after," Meade said. "Dial the number of your phone booth out at the bar."

Costello dialed. Adams' voice answered, small but distinct over the wire: "Hello, Tony. We got all of it on a record. The words might not mean a lot but how you said it does. We got a mike in there."

Meade said, "Do you still want to be funny?"

Costello flung the phone headpiece with his left hand. It swung around on the end of the cord and banged against the front of the desk. He said, "Okay, Lee."

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BENDER and Costello went with Adams. Meade called Sheriff Young from the phone booth by the bar.

"I got a confession out of Tony Costello about the Diamond case," he said. "Yes, Tony Costello of the Cairo. . . . No, I didn't have witnesses, but he thinks I did. . . . No; no proof. Nothing. . . . I hope he'll talk to you voluntarily.

"I know he's too hot to touch. With his drag, you can't put the screws on him. And I mussed him up, boss. I shot him through the shoulder and—"

Meade pulled the receiver away from his ear while the line crackled. "I know, boss. It's my neck unless he just opens up without even prompting. There's just a chance he'll be in that frame of mind. . . ."

He wiped a sleeve across his face as he went from booth to bar. He ordered rye, and was pouring when Nan said beside him, "Ask for another glass."

"Another glass," Meade said, and then: "Hello." Nan's face was dead white except for lip rouge.

She took the rye without a chaser, bent her head, her white shoulders cringing.

"Is he going to talk?"

"Who told you anything?"

"Gail called me. When I got here she told me off, and then Adams told me off. Oh, Lee, the risk you took— I know what this will mean if Costello doesn't voluntarily talk to the sheriff. Can you pour me another drink? No, I don't want a drink. I want to talk to you, Lee. I've been such a narrow-minded fool. Lee, you're wonderful."

"Job."

"I don't mean gratitude. I mean how I feel about you."

"Upset."

"Maybe; and it's about time. Lee, unless Costello talks, it will be hard on you, and Pete will still be— Lee, I'm so glad I saw things before it was too late. Your side of things. Law and order, regardless."

"Nuts. I'm a Cossack. Tonight I put the heat on without a shred of proof. Private third degree. I screwed down on them. Slugged Bender, shot Costello through the shoulder. Bluffed, intimidated, tricked— Anything to get my man."

"You said there were a hundred ways to break a case."

"That sounds funny from you."

"I've seen the other side. . . . Gail, you were a dear to call me. I was due to be told off."

Gail had come in from the dining room. "Just an old palsy-walsy," she said offhand. Her baby smile was glazed. "Good old Gail."

"You're so sweet."

"Nuts to you," Gail said sweetly. "He wants you; that's all. Listen, Nan, if you let him loose again I'll get him if I have to frame him."

MEADE looked from one girl to the other. The booth phone rang. Meade crossed to it, listened, hung up.

"You get the big story," he said to Gail. "The important neck takes it. Tony Costello loves to talk."

Nan's breath went out and in quiveringly. "Pete is free!"

Gail crossed to the phone. When she was through with the call she came back to the bar and asked, "Where's Nan?"

"She went to see Pete," Meade said.

"Why didn't you go with her?"

"She didn't ask me to."

"Lee, she was only excited—"

"So am I. I'm walking on feathers."

"You'd better chase her."

"I've done too much of that. Anyhow, in a week this will all wear off with her like a honeymoon, and she'll be back to her little pat diagram of Utopia. The funny thing is that I don't care any more. It's like an argument or something. You go through Hell to prove a point, and when you win you don't care who's right or wrong."

Gail was trying to make that dimpled baby smile, but wasn't doing so well at it. "Take me to a corner, Lee. I'm—going to bawl or something."

Meade threw off a glass of rye, grimaced. "Don't like that stuff any more," he said, taking her arm. "Let's get out of here."

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Spelke loomed gigantic against the sunset sky

Dark Thunder

By ROBERT CARSE

CHAPTER XX

HERE THE HEROES DIE

DAVID LOWE thought that the Germans took a very long time climbing the stairs. He heard the grind of their hobbed boots on the stone of the steps, the rasp of their breathing, and then the click of the grenade pins they pulled. One of those grenades clunked right beside him, rolled along the floor.

He was not consciously aware that he bent down, picked it up and hurled it back. But the burst nearly wrecked the staircase beyond the barricade.

For part of a second only, but long enough for him to remember the scene all his life, he saw men within the lurid bloom of explosion. They held various poses. One strained half crouching, a grenade lifted to throw. Another was flat against the wall, his arms over his head and face. The third had lunged right into the core of the flame, giving his body to certain, complete destruction, and the fourth, a young and handsome man, stood straight, quite unafraid.

All of them had sensed death, he realized, as soon as he had pitched back the grenade. Here for them was the true soldier's death promised by the Fatherland. The maniacal dreams of the little Austrian had once more received sacrifice. In Berchtesgaden it would be very cool and quiet tonight. . . .

David Lowe turned around, to the peo-

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ple on his side of the barricade. "They won't be back," he said simply. "That stopped them. The stairs are gone."

None of the others was able to speak. But Margett moved close to him, and he felt her arm about his shoulders. He talked to her out of sheer nervous necessity.

"I saw them die," he said. "I was so near in that last second I could see their faces. . . . Death, killing, have begun to fascinate me. I think about killing all the time. Because I waited so long, I guess, before I became violent myself, and because I've seen so much of it."

"You mustn't go on," she said. "I shall hate you if you do."

"You mean," he said, "I'll be like them down there. Like Spelke."

"Yes," she said. "That's what I fear."

"But Spelke didn't come up the stairs himself. He knew better; he sent the other boys."

"He's down there now," Margett said. "Below the tower. He's calling to you."

Spelke was level-voiced:

"Very nice, that bit. But you're all through. I can bring the whole tower tumbling down with another pair of grenades. Come on out of there. If you don't come fast, I'll peg Folsom to the ground where you can watch him slowly die with the ants crawling over him. You've not got much ammunition left, and you at least want Margett to live."

David Lowe stepped away from Margett so that she could not feel the sudden, trembling tautness of his body. "How many rounds have you got in that gun?" he muttered to Hugo.

"About half a clip," Hugo told him. "The rest of the pieces are empty. Outside of them, we've got nothing but the machete."

THE light was beginning to change in the tower. Thin ribands of silver dropped through the window slits. It would be dawn pretty soon, David Lowe told himself. Then Spelke could lob grenades in here like apples into a barrel. Spelke was right. They were licked. The only way to save Margett's life or any of their lives was by surrender.

"Margett," he said, "I'm going to send you out of here. You and Bruecken. If I do that, I think Spelke will—"

"Reason makes no appeal to him," Margett broke in, "or mercy. Sending me out, even with Bruecken, won't change him."

"Maybe not," David Lowe said, and slightly smiled, touching her shoulder. "But he figures that Hugo and Vaubin and I really make the defense here, and he isn't sure that you and Bruecken have fought at all. It was too dark before to see who was doing what.

"You can go out and tell him you and Bruecken were captured by us, forced to come here, just as he himself was. Talk it up strong; give him any sort of lie that might save your life."

"Why?" Margett said. "And why send Bruecken with me?"

"A few of those planes at the field are still all right," David Lowe said. "Bruecken's a pilot; he'll know which one has enough gas left to fly to Port au Prince. If you and he can convince Spelke you didn't come here of your own will, you should be able to slip over and grab it, get away."

"Then how about you?" she said. She stood right before him, looking up into his face, and in that place of half-light and drifting, bitter smoke she appeared absolutely beautiful.

He wanted to take her to him, never let her go. But he said quietly, "I've figured out a plan for Hugo and Vaubin and me. I want to get into the house. A big stock of guns and ammunition is in there, and so's John Folsom.

"We're short of ammunition, and Folsom is badly wounded; he must need care that bunch hasn't given him. As soon as you and Bruecken are safely out of here, we three will make a rush. That will give you your chance to get to the planes. Spelke will have to split his force in half, and if we move slick and fast, we should both outsmart him."

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"You make it sound very logical," she said. "But do you think Spelke will believe any story Bruecken and I tell?"

"Yes, I do," David Lowe said. "He's worried, and in a bad jam. He has to get the gold out of here and he lacks the planes to carry it. Right now, more than anything else, he wants to reach this radio, talk to his people outside. Don't forget that a bit ago he was forced to shoot down a United States Marine Corps plane, and he knows that pretty soon a whole lot more will be flying in to see what happened to it."

"He still has his anti-aircraft guns to protect him."

"Not for long. The Marine Corps planes will bomb them to bits once they get started. He has to move fast, and take chances he wouldn't ordinarily consider. Obviously, he wants you as an hostage, to be used the same way I planned to use him.

"And after all the men he's lost tonight, he'll need Bruecken to help in carrying the gold. If he suspects you and Bruecken aren't telling the truth, he'll wait until the gold is out before he gets tough with you. So what do you say, *cherie?* Will you go?"

"Yes," she said. "I will. But you must explain this to Bruecken."

Bruecken had been listening to them, his pale young face tense as he tried to grasp the unfamiliar English. "I'll go with you, *Fräulein,*" he said. "I understand what Herr Lowe wishes us to do."

"Thank you, friend," Margett said. Then her glance went back to David Lowe. He was at a window slit, shouting to Spelke.

"Stop shooting, Spelke!" he said. "Margett is coming out now, and I'm letting Bruecken come with her. But one of my other men is wounded and it'll take us some time to get him down. Be patient; we'll move as fast as we can."

"You'd better," Spelke said. "Your girl wouldn't look so pretty, buried under the ruins of the tower."

Margett told David Lowe goodbye at the top of the shattered stairs. She said just the one word, then leaned forward and kissed him on the mouth. Bruecken had already advanced out beyond the barricade and she followed. Bruecken straddled a broken beam, his feet set on chunks of the shattered masonry. "Should I go first, *Fräulein?*" he asked.

"No," she said. "Let me go. Then come after me."

CHAPTER XXI

RUN, AMERIKANER

SHE swung down from stone to stone. There was blood on the wall beside her, and spattered brains. She shut her teeth to keep back nausea, tried not to look at it. Then memory came to her of how she and Ernst had played here in the days of their youth.

This had been their favorite spot, their castle where most any time dreams might come true. She and Ernst, supported by a dozen of the field-hands' children, had defended it against imaginary but terrific odds, and always won. Their trained lizards had raced up these steps, and once she had tripped and fallen down them, skinned her knees so hard that she had been forced to stay in bed for days.

But now Ernst was dead. Ernst had been murdered by the man who had called him his best friend, and the enemies were very real. They waited below, staring up at her. She could see them, feel their eyes passing over her legs and body.

A weakness of awful rage went through her. She nearly lost her grip and slipped. Then cold calm entered her brain. Up there above, she told herself, was the man she loved. He must live, and she must live, if only to avenge Ernst.

You're a woman, she thought, and haven't the strength to kill the way they do. But you're pretty. Use your good looks. Charm the swine. Make them gape and pant after you. Then trick them. Get Spelke's gun, any gun, and run with Bruecken for that plane. . . .

She dropped to the ground with her skirt rucked up about her knees. The

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shoulder of her dress was torn, but she made no attempt to cover the flesh it showed. She lifted her hands to push her dishevelled hair back from her face, looked at the men before her with a wide-gazing, slow glance.

They were passionately aroused by the desire to kill. A gaunt, pent look held their faces. Their lips were tightly drawn, and in their eyes were small, bright points of light. Spelke stood to one side of them, a pistol in his hand. He possessed the power to smile at her; the rest had nothing but that glazed glance of lust.

She walked slowly forward to Spelke, stumbling a little. Don't be afraid, she thought. He's like the rest. It's just that he's the leader, has a bit more brains and scorn.

"I want to thank you, Maxim," she said, "for being so good. We were trapped, Bruecken and I. There was nothing we could do."

"Of course," Spelke said. He was still smiling, but now he looked past her and at Bruecken.

Bruecken walked upright, his hands flat at his sides. *"Herr Oberst,"* he began, "I—"

Spelke struck without warning. He slammed the barrel of his heavy Luger full across Bruecken's face. The nose bone and cartilage gave with a soft snapping sound. A gasping cry came from Bruecken. He went to his knees, then prone. Blood pooled out and darkened his fair hair, muddied the powdered mortar and stone.

"Slob," Spelke said. "I charged you to guard the tower, and guard it with your life." He brought back his foot, started a swinging kick.

Margett took that blow herself. She clasped Spelke by both arms, clung to him. "No, you can't," she said. "Don't hurt him any more. He was loyal and is loyal. It's he who saved your life. When they came to the tower, they dragged you with them and told him you'd die unless they were allowed to enter. Please—please, Maxim. There has been enough of blood."

She wasn't acting now; the true accents of horror and supplication were in her voice. She struggled with all her strength against Spelke, her body blocking him.

The glare of anger slowly left Spelke's eyes. They widened, became hard, speculative. The release of his breath was moist and hot. But she did not move, or release her grasp. She looked fully into his face, noting the little, sharp marks his teeth had left in his underlip, the reddish veins in the nostrils of the short nose, the twitch of a vein high in the blunt-lined forehead.

If I ever have the chance to kill him, she thought, I shall put my bullet right through that vein in his forehead. Can't he feel my hate? Doesn't he sense that with every nerve of my being I want to murder him? David, David, you were right. A man like this breeds the madness of killing. . . .

SPELKE was standing back from her. He brushed her hands loose. "Come in the house," he said. "Get Bruecken up and bring him in. I think you care too much about what happens to him. But maybe you've had plenty of the *Amerikaner*. Maybe you'd like to try a real German for a change."

"I don't know," she murmured. "I'm not sure." She was bending, helping Bruecken to his feet. "All I want is that there is no more killing here."

Spelke laughed; he slipped his pistol into the holster and flexed his big hands. "But Bruecken is no more than a boy," he said. "Ernst always said you and I would make a fine couple, and now I believe he was right."

"Ernst—" she started to say, and then couldn't say any more.

Little Gilschau had advanced from the group of Germans before the tower. He carried a grenade and he fingered the pin. "All right, *Amerikaner,*" he called. "Now you come out of there or the tower comes down. You've had enough time to get your wounded ready."

"Why don't you look back?" Spelke

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said. "Why don't you go on talking, Margett?"

She nearly betrayed herself then, almost wheeled and struck at him with her empty hands. But thought of David Lowe and the sight of Bruecken's bloodied, mutilated face stopped her. "I'm afraid," she said.

Spelke slowed. He shifted the balance of his pistol belt and smoothed his short-cut hair. "Never be afraid of me, *Liebchen,*" he said. "I'm a gentle lover, once a woman understands me."

They entered the house with Bruecken lurching between them. Spelke shoved Bruecken asprawl in a chair in the hall. "Stay there, stupid," he said. "When you feel a bit better, you can set that nose any way you want it."

"Ja, Herr Oberst," Bruecken said thickly, but his glance to Margett was swift, clear.

Outside, men were shouting, and Margett heard David Lowe's voice. She turned toward the door and through it got a glimpse of the tower. David Lowe was emerging there. He walked crouched, for Hugo was behind him, and they carried the slack body of Vaubin.

Gilschau and the other Germans formed a sort of semi-circle a few yards from them. "Drop the black," Gilschau commanded. "Then you can start to run, *Amerikaner.* We'll give you a ten-yard lead before we begin to shoot."

"Thanks," David Lowe said. He had let go his hold on Vaubin's ankles. The old Negro slumped flat, and Hugo knelt by him. Then Lowe moved away from Vaubin and Hugo. He started to run in the direction Gilschau had indicated.

A burst of eager curses came from the Germans there. They were shouldering each other back to get room to shoot. "Not too fast," Gilschau told them. "Let him make a decent target."

"Shut your eyes, *Liebchen,*" Spelke said. He stood right beside her. "You needn't watch that. It's just Gilschau's idea of cheap humor."

Margett made no reply. She had been watching David Lowe, but now she watched Hugo. Hugo was flat on the ground. He was pulling out from inside Vaubin's cotton shirt the automatic rifle they had used in the tower. His shots whipped the semi-circle of Germans from right to left.

THEY had been intent upon David Lowe. Gilschau was the first of them to understand what was happening. He yelled and flung himself to the ground. But most of the men around him were already dead or wounded, and none of them had taken a shot at Lowe.

Veins swelled in Spelke's throat. "A smart swine," he said. Then he brought the Luger up, braced the barrel across his left wrist for a deliberate shot.

Margett remembered way in the back of her brain a book on jiu-jitsu Ernst had once read to her when they were kids. She stiffened her hand, lifted it and brought it down like an ax against the side of Spelke's throat.

He fell to his knees, coughing and weak. For an instant she saw his eyes, terribly distended, mad with hate and comprehension. But he still held his pistol, and he was fumbling it around to train on her. She swung and ran along the hall. "Bruecken," she called. "Now—now! Here's our chance."

Bruecken ran like a drunken man. He jolted into her and tripped over every obstacle. But he kept going, and they were out of the house, they were across the lawn, and ahead of them was the fire-blackened field, the planes.

It was Bruecken who found the plane. Full sense returned to him as he saw it. He was immediately sure, swift in every motion. "This one," he said. "It's one they've been keeping in reserve, and the tanks are nearly full. Get in, then just sit still."

There were men on the field who shot at them. Bullets racked along the plane, making loud, ringing sounds against the fuselage until Bruecken got the motor started. Then there was no sound except

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the motors. An exultation, a sensation of tremendous triumph, came to Margett. She wanted to shout out her defiance at the men who fired upon the plane.

But it was off the ground; the men were gone. When she looked down, the house, the mill, all of Crête à Moulin were curiously fore-shortened and out of perspective.

I'm leaving, she thought. I'm going away from David. Fright gripped her and she felt the plane tremble and pitch. But then she forced herself to reach down and find the safety belt, buckle it about her. Bruecken was lifting the plane in a steady climb. He was just beginning to flatten out, head west and north toward Port au Prince. Clouds closed about the plane, shut Crête à Moulin from her vision.

Sleep, she told herself. You'll be in Port au Prince in an hour. Then you'll need all your strength. You'll have to talk to the president, to all of them there, get men and planes to come back for David. For David, the man you love. . . .

DAVID LOWE heard the plane. It made a roaring louder than the shots. She's safe, he thought. "Good going, Margett," he murmured, and then turned and called to Hugo.

"Get in the house," he told him. "Come this way and bring Vaubin with you."

Bullets whacked the turf at his heels as he lunged in through a side door. In the first room was a gun-rack holding Mauser carbines and Spandaus. He slung two of the Mausers from his shoulders by the sling-straps, then picked up a Spandau gun.

Somewhere further on in the house a man was moving. Furniture scraped, and a voice thickly cursed in German. That's Spelke, and he moves as if he's hurt, David Lowe told himself. Step quietly, don't make any more noise, and you can get him. . . .

But Spelke saw him as he emerged out into the main hall. He stood at the far end, his broad body framed by the sun-light-filled main door. His pistol made a pale lick of flame as he fired.

David Lowe threw himself down sidewise, his fingers closing on the Spandau action. He had loosed twenty or thirty shots before he was aware Spelke *was* gone. The German had dropped flat, crawled out the door and onto the lawn after firing those first shots.

"You missed him," David Lowe grunted. "You had him, and you missed him. Go out there now to find him and you're sure to be killed."

He rose to his feet and went at a slow stride along the hall. The big rooms on either side of the hall were deserted, dusty. But John Folsom's in here, he thought. I saw them bring him in while we were in the tower.

John Folsom was in a little sort of alcove off the library. At sight of him a kind of sick, dull horror came over David Lowe. The Germans had stretched Folsom out on his back, secured his wrists and ankles to pieces of the massive mahogany furniture with military belts. Cigarette ends had been used to burn the palms of his hands. Across his jaw were the welts of repeated blows from a rubber hose. The eyes were swelled shut, and even in unconsciousness the mouth lines were agonized.

For several seconds, Lowe thought John Folsom was dead. He knelt down beside him, tried the heart and pulse. There was a very irregular beat, a respiration that could just be felt.

David Lowe was past anger, past the point where he could release his emotion in weeping. He numbly sat there, staring at the man who was his greatest friend, holding his hand, whispering his name. He was like that when Hugo and Vaubin came into the room.

They stopped, stood very still. Then old Vaubin knelt down, examined Folsom's wounds. "He'll live, *m'sieu,*" he said to David Lowe. "He's wounded very badly, but he'll live. I know; I've been a kind of doctor for the black folks here."

"But they tortured him," David Lowe

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said. "Look at his hands and his face. And something's wrong with his back. When they brought him here from the plane, he was already suffering from that."

He got up then and started striding stiffly for the door. There was no definite idea or plan in his head; all he wanted was to come upon Germans he could kill.

Hugo stopped him, shut and locked the library door. "You can't do that," he said. "They were right behind us when we came in. They're not sure just where we are, but they won't take long to find out. We've got to fight all together now, *m'sieu,* and we should do something for your friend."

"He needs a hospital and first-class doctors," David Lowe said. "He'll die if he's left like this for many more hours. I'm almost licked—I admit it. I don't know how to get him out of here, or where to take him if we did."

Vaubin had gone to the door, crouched against it, listening to the men in the hall. "There's about a dozen of them there," he said. "If we can chase them out of the hall, we'll get into the cellar. Then we'll be all right. Old Captain Johann built a tunnel that leads from the cellar way out past the tower. These men outside have never been told about it."

"Why do you think they haven't?" David Lowe said.

Vaubin almost smiled. "Because they've stored all their gold down there," he said. "They've got the idea there's only one door into the place."

CHAPTER XXII

THE GOLDEN TUNNEL

DAVID LOWE took the carbines from his shoulders, gave one to Vaubin, the other to Hugo. "You've done a lot for me," he said. "Just because you're good men, and know that what's been going on here hasn't been right.

"But now I want to ask one final thing of you. Will you help me get Folsom out of Crête à Moulin? If you don't, I can't blame you. You've risked your lives plenty, and this isn't your war."

Their answer was wordless They just nodded to him, then took one of the small rugs from the floor, with it made a kind of stretcher for John Folsom. He tried to thank them, but there wasn't time. A rifle butt was being hammered through the panels of the door.

David Lowe made a gesture with his hand. He signaled Vaubin and Hugo to carry Folsom back, over by the wall. Then he drew back himself, his knees bent a bit, the Spandau gun held waist-high.

There or four Germans rushed into the room as soon as the door was smashed. They came shooting, throwing their bullets wide. David Lowe killed them with one quick burst. He went on past them, and out into the hall. He hammered shots from the Spandau at the men gathering there, drove them scrambling outside. "Now we go," he muttered to Vaubin and Hugo. "I'll keep them out of the hall. Go ahead of me."

After the sunlit hall, the clamor of shots and the extreme tension of combat, the cellar seemed not quite real to David Lowe. It was dark, and quiet, cool. Thick double doors led to it, and those Vaubin knew how to unlock, then locked behind them. He found a candle stub, scratched a match into flame .

David Lowe looked first at Folsom. The big man lay motionless, unconscious. "He feels nothing," Vaubin said. "But you were right, *m'sieu,* when you said that he must have the care of a very good doctor soon. Don't worry, please. Hugo and I can carry him for some distance. We're men who all our lives have been used to heavy loads."

"Then he'll be all right, and so will we," David Lowe said. "But where's this tunnel? We'll have to get out of here fast."

Vaubin lifted the candle high. "Down at the other end. There, behind the chests."

The Germans had piled Henri Christophe's old treasure chests in neat rows. They reached nearly to the ceiling, and from wall to wall. Tags were on each one of them, written in close German script.

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"Spelke's already counted and checked his loot," David Lowe said. "He won't ever take it out of here, though. We're the men who'll do that."

He stepped forward as he spoke, thrusting aside the chests so that Vaubin and Hugo could get past. There was the thud of blows against the outer door now, and the sudden, tremoring blast of a hand grenade.

In that confined space, the shock nearly knocked them off their feet. But Vaubin kept his candle lit and lifted overhead. "Right there," he told David Lowe. "That's the entrance to the tunnel. Just pull back those planks. You'll find a lever under the third stone from the corner."

David Lowe ran his hands rapidly down the damp stones. One had a sharply shelving edge, and under it was the rusty lever. He pressed the thing, laughed in hysterical relief as the door swung open.

THE tunnel was narrow, tortuously winding. It had not been used in years and they crunched lizards beneath their feet, dragged cobwebs into their eyes. But then the dust-heavy air changed, and David Lowe smelled fresh earth. He stretched out his hands, shoved hard where Vaubin told him to.

Sunlight fell upon them in a white glitter. They saw the sky, blue and absolutely cloudless, heard the cheep of insects and the rustle of tobacco plants stirred by the morning breeze. "Very nice," David Lowe said. "Just about as nice as anything I've ever seen."

He crawled out among the tobacco, braced himself to help the other two with John Folsom. Then he stood straight, flexed his aching muscles. They were several hundred yards past the windmill tower, he realized, and right beyond was a patch of forest in which they would be safe.

He led the way into the forest, the two Negroes striding heavily under their load. "I'd like to tell you we could stop and take a rest," he told them. "But we can't. I remember the police dogs Hugo and I met the night we came back here. We've just got to keep going until we're down the mountain, or some place where men won't shoot us on sight."

"We're ready to keep going," Hugo said. "Vaubin was right when he said he and I are men who're used to carrying big loads. You'll have to clear trail for us, and that's just as hard a job."

David Lowe felt almost gay then, thinking that he had outsmarted Spelke. He laughed at the idea of clearing trail. But twenty minutes later, as they came out to the first ridge beyond Crête à Moulin, he understood just how close to exhaustion he really was.

He was wet with sweat from head to foot. His knees knocked together, and he kept stumbling all the time while he cleared the brush and broken branches for them. He looked covertly at Vaubin and Hugo to see how they were taking it. Their broad-boned faces were impassive, quite expressionless. They moved with mechanical steps, slowly and in perfect unison.

Don't worry about them, he thought. Worry about yourself. Then he went back to his old trick of dreaming of Margett.

He built his and Margett's entire life in the future. They would take the *Hyperbole* when this was over, head on south alone through all the small and lovely islands. At night, they'd lie side by side on deck with the wind drumming the dull white tautness of the mainsail, and the spume a greenish, delicate tracery over the smooth black reaches of the sea.

They'd swim at dawn, first one, then the other, watching for shark and barracuda, of course, but making a joke about it.

If they caught a shark on one of their troll lines, they'd jam a stick between his jaws, dub him Maxim Spelke and tow him astern for days. But then there was the return. Crête à Moulin, probably, but not long, and afterward New York.

New York was his town, after all. He loved the place, he really did. That was where he'd started out, and where he'd finish. When he had left last time, he was all but running away.

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With Margett, though, everything was going to be different. They would find a flat somewhere on Murray Hill, or maybe up there near the Queensborough Bridge on that little street whose name he always forgot.

Then he would write his novel. Brick Hanegan said every newspaperman was unhappy until he had taken a crack at a novel. But while he was writing it, he could go back into the shop and see the boys, sit around and watch the copy-readers run their pencils through other men's copy.

Then, when things were quiet in Europe again, he'd get around to taking a job in the Paris bureau, or in Moscow, or Rome.

"M'sieu," Hugo said. *"M'sieu,* you'd better stop now. Men are down there, the other side of that fallen tree."

The dream receded, faded in David Lowe's brain. He was back in Haiti, stumbling through thorn scrub, tearing it aside with his body, making trail for two men who could barely walk and a third who was just about dead. He looked with a blank, slow regard at the tree ahead, fumbled the Spandau gun up into the firing position. But then he saw the men who were behind the tree.

THEY wore the peaked campaign hats and khaki uniforms of the Haitian Guard. One, the closest, had a captain's bars on his shoulder straps, and he was calling out a challenge in French.

"Mille remêrciments," David Lowe said, and tried to smile. My name's Lowe. Maybe you're heard of me; I hope you have. These two men are from Crête à Moulin. The man they're carrying is Major Folsom of the United States Army."

The captain came forward through the brush on the run. He shook David Lowe's hand hard. "We have been stationed here since dawn," he said. "I've got orders to keep fixed pickets, see nobody leaves or enters Crête à Moulin."

"Then the big, busy diplomats are still haggling at Cape Haitian," David Lowe said.

"No," the captain said. He shook his head. "It's a little bit more serious than that. Things have been developing very fast in Europe. Germany is about ready to attack Poland, and any day there may be war."

David Lowe silently repeated the words to himself. He said them over several times. It was only by the captain's eyes that he realized how shocked he must look. "Here," the captain said, and handed him his canteen. "That's rum. Take plenty."

The rum burned right through him. It started flame that seared his brain, made him feel numb and witless. You can't take much more of a beating, he thought. This last has just about wrecked you. War, war . . . Germany, and Poland . . .

"I'll have to get to Port au Prince, Captain," he said. "And I guess that's the best place for Major Folsom to be taken. How much to go before we can get a truck, or a car?"

"The road's only about a hundred yards away," the captain said. "There's a staff car and a driver you can have. You should be in Port au Prince before six o'clock."

"Fine," David Lowe said. Then his knees began to give, and he reached out to a tree for support, missed and fell headlong. He saw the captain bending over him, talking to him, but it was through a fog of exhaustion. The fog widened fast and he had the sensation he floated in it, floated down and down into sleep. . . .

CHAPTER XXIII

ADDRESSING AMERICA

MARGETT was beside him. She must have been there for hours, he thought. Now he had vague memories of seeing her in the instants of partial wakefulness that had come to him. "Margett," he said, and took her hand, "how are you?"

She got from her chair and bent over the bed where he lay, kissed him many times. "You've worried me," she said. "That's all. But now you seem to be getting better."

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"Completely so," David Lowe said. "Where is this?"

"Port au Prince," she said. "This is the Hotel Splendide. A Haitian woman named Maria Fraenckel who's one of my best friends owns it. I had them bring you here as soon as the Guard car came down from the mountains."

"How long have I been here?"

"More than a day and a night."

"How is John Folsom?"

"United States Navy doctors flew here from Key West to operate on him. They say he'll be a long time recuperating, but then he'll be all right. The doctors have a lot of praise for Vaubin and Hugo. Carrying out the major that way saved his life."

David Lowe looked around the broad, shadowy room, then back at her again. "Margett," he said, "what's the news from Europe?"

Her hands locked tight. For several seconds, she sat wordless. "Very bad," she said. "I—I just can't tell you about that now, David. But your friend Brick Hanegan is here. He flew in yesterday from New York. He's called repeatedly to see how you were."

"Then go and get Brick," David Lowe said. "Let him tell me."

He got out of bed after Margett had left the room, went out onto the balcony giving from it. Great flamboyant trees and royal palms flanked the smooth curves of the hotel lawn. Below, stretching to the sea, was the city.

Most of the houses and buildings of the city were white. They gleamed in the brassy glare of the afternoon sun, and the sea possessed a hundred shades of colors. Close inshore, the reefs showed tawny, black-ribbed, then they gave the water a parrot green, a sheer opalescence, and finally a sapphire that was brighter than any gem.

In the far distance of the vast gulf was the island whose name he remembered was La Gonave. It had a smoky, dark green shade that was almost blue-black, as had the headlands that reared north and south.

Peaceful, he thought, and absolutely lovely. But there's no more beauty here than up at Crête à Moulin. The Crête must have been as lovely before the Germans took the place. Now—

He turned. Brick Hanegan was coming in the door.

LINES of fatigue marked Hanegan's face. His eyes had a narrow squint, as though he had been looking at a lot of print for a very long time. But he smiled when he took David Lowe's hand.

"It seems," he said, "that the Germans can't kill you any more than the whisky. But first let me give you what little good news I've got. I picked up Monk in Cape Haitian as I came through, and now's he down in town having himself a time with those two lads from Crête à Moulin."

"Right," David Lowe said. "Now how about Europe?"

"War has started," Hanegan said. "Germany has invaded Poland. Tonight, or tomorrow, England and France are supposed to keep their pledges and go to Poland's support. Russia and Italy are staying out of it, and so is the United States."

There were cigarettes on the bed table. David Lowe walked over and picked up the packet before he was able to speak. "The holocaust," he said. "The end of Western civilization in our generation. England was warned for years, and so was France, and they could have stopped it. But now of course it's too late. I can't understand, though, what you're doing here, Brick. Why aren't you in New York?"

Brick Hanegan made a quick gesture. "You've been playing a kind of super Rover boy the last few days, killing because you had to kill, and not with much time to think. The story you uncorked at Crête à Moulin has tremendous value for several reasons. It not only shows what the Nazis are doing here on our side of the world, but it's made America see just what the Nazi spirit is when they let go full blast.

"You must have splashed my stuff big."

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"I did," Hanegan. "Over the whole front page of the *Courier* in every edition, and more than a hundred other papers in the country bought your copy and gave it banner heads. America's waking up; you kicked them out of their sleep. You've proved to them that Hitler means world aggression, not only possession of Central Europe.

"If America's going to survive, it has to know that. So I flew down here to see what was behind that first piece of yours. There's a couple of perfectly competent men in New York who can run the paper a bit for me, as long as I can get to the radio phone and tell them what to print. But what happened before you left Crête à Moulin? Where's Spelke?"

"He's still there," David Lowe said. "He and the rest of his flyers, and his planes. I guess Margett's told you part of what's gone on."

"She did. But you'll have to tell me the rest, then sit down and write it. Do you mind, Davey?"

"No," David Lowe said. His eyes were bleak, tragic. "I also hoped that there would be peace in our lifetime."

He made no notes before he wrote his story. It was all there in his brain. He envisioned the world in tremendous panorama. His years in Europe came clear in memory.

Spain, then Austria, and Prague. After that, Spain again, where he saw the terrible retreat from Barcelona.

And in Figueras one of the Spanish Republican leaders had pointed to the map and said, "This isn't simply the crushing of Spain itself. This is a blow from which all the world will suffer."

DAVID LOWE brushed his fingers across the typewriter keys. He looked at the blank sheet of paper before him. Then he shut his eyes, so that in his brain he could see America.

There was that little Connecticut town where he was born, and kids on sleds, kids in swimming, and the old folks sitting on the porches at night, quiet after a long day's work, but content, knowing they had worked well, and believing that what they had would always be theirs.

Then there were the towns further West, Buffalo, and Cleveland and Detroit and Chicago. They were big, tough places, full of life, full of strength. That was where the workers lived, the men with the blue-veined, sinewy arms and the union badges on their caps, talking as they walked home from the plants about their new radios and their new cars and how Red Ruffing could sure pitch a game of ball.

But there was more of America beyond, the great, brown sweep of the Dust Bowl that the government was slowly bringing back under cultivation, then the West Coast, rich and powerful, facing toward a Japan already breaking under the pressure of its own dreams of brutal conquest.

But the place he had come to love was New York. He saw it as it would be tonight. The crowd was thick between the Astor and the Times Building. All of the folks from the theater and the movie palaces and the cheap, funny little honky-tonk joints were staring up at the news panel running around the Times Building.

"War," they read up there. "War in Europe." They were from the Bronx, and Bushwick Avenue, and Canarsie, and they were Jews and Italians, Syrians, Irish, Germans and Negroes. But for them those big letters all had the same meaning, the same fascination of horror.

War . . . . In Europe, men were dying tonight, and over Warsaw the German bombers were smoothly circling to let go the slim black bombs. "America's next, maybe, hey?" they said in the crowd. "Maybe we go the same way we did the last time. But what's it to us? Let them fight their own war. We don't want any piece of it. We're safe here. Out past Coney, the ocean goes for three thousand miles. . . ."

David Lowe brushed his fingers over the typewriter keys again. He straightened the edge of the sheet of paper and lit a cigarette. Then he bent his head and

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shoulders, began to write. Behind him, where he had sat motionless for many minutes, Brick Hanegan let go a long, slow sigh.

Hanegan read copy on the pages as they came from the machine. He didn't look at David Lowe or show by any sign what he felt. But when the last page was done he went running down the stairs to the radio phone.

"Rip out that lead story," he told the man who was acting for him as managing editor of the *Courier* in New York. "Put in this piece of Lowe's and print every word. I don't care what the European stuff is for the moment. Here's what the Nazis are doing right out here. Part of it's news, and part of it's editorial, and the rest is something for which I haven't got a name. Now give me a man who can take this fast."

DAVID LOWE was half asleep when Hanegan came back into the room. He sat with his arms crossed on the machine, his head on his arms. "How was it, Brick?" he said.

"I'm not sure yet," Brick Hanegan said. "You put so much in there that you broke all the copy-desk rules I ever learned. You start off with a straight news account of what happened at Crête à Moulin. Then you give a one-man history of Europe during the last ten years, and end up with a terrific diatribe against war."

"I meant all of that," David Lowe said. "I meant to make America realize its peril unless it acts."

Brick Hanegan came over and clasped him by the shoulders. "You did," he said. "What you wrote then is really magnificent. You took the events at Crête à Moulin and made them into a message no American can fail to understand. If the President's the kind of man I think he is, he'll have that read over every radio station in the country. But how would you like a drink?"

"No, thanks," David Lowe said. "I have to talk with Margett. Then I'm going back to Crête à Moulin."

"Why go back there? That's a tough spot, and after all, you're no soldier."

David Lowe's eyes narrowed until they were nearly shut. "Spelke's still at Crête à Moulin," he said. "Spelke and his bonnie, bonnie boys of the Condor Legion. Now there's war, those planes and the gold are vitally important to the Nazis.

"The gold alone is enough to finance their side of the war for another year. And in final desperation Spelke might use the planes to bomb our base at Puerto Rico, or take a crack at Baltimore and New York. I want to wreck the planes, get Spelke—and the gold."

"But Spelke can't get out of there."

"He can if just half a dozen other Nazi planes, loaded with gasoline, fly in from South America. When I left, the radio in the tower could still be made to work. I tried to wreck it, but I didn't have the time. It's an easy bet Spelke got a call out to South America hours ago."

"You must be right," Hanegan said. "But will you take me with you to Crête à Moulin?"

"Give me one good reason why you should go," David Lowe said.

"I've been over in the hospital," Hanegan said. "I've seen what the Nazis did to John Folsom."

David Lowe just nodded, then turned toward the door.

Margett stood at the foot of the staircase waiting for him. Out on the wide porch beyond, David Lowe saw, were a lot of high-ranking American and Haitian officers. But he took Margett by the shoulder, led her into a corner of the salon. "I guess you know," he told her. "I must go back, up there."

"Yes," she said. "I understand that. Some of these officers from your army have been talking with me. They've asked me about the terrain around Crête à Moulin. It seems that without radio direction it's quite difficult to land planes there. So I've volunteered to fly in a plane, show them the way. Do you mind?"

"I won't," David Lowe said, "as long as I'm in the same plane with you."

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They went out to the porch then, quite unaware that they walked with their hands closely clasped.

"I've just filed a story, gentlemen," he said to the officers, "telling about this to the American public. Now I'd like to go back to Crête à Moulin, and Mr. Hanegan says he'd like to accompany me. How's chances?"

A small, squarely built American colonel wearing the globe and anchor device of the Marine Corps on his field cap answered him. "They're very good," he said. "What we need right now is the truth about this situation spread all over the world.

"You can be of help to us, too, in getting in to Crête à Moulin. The Haitian government has been in long communication with Washington, and it's been definitely decided that joint action be taken against the German force there."

David Lowe indicated Margett with a sidewise glance. "The only way to get in to Crête à Moulin fast is by plane," he said. "Miss Rudvig knows the country. She'd be a lot of help to a pilot leading the flight. All I'd like to do is ride in the same plane with her."

"The reports we get from the Guard pickets up there," the colonel said, "are that the whole mountain range is held in a heavy mist. If the planes got separated there might be trouble."

From the edge of the porch there was a low but long coughing sound. Monk stood there, dressed in a sharply creased white suit and wearing a straw hat with a three-colored band. Beside him were Vaubin and Hugo.

David Lowe smiled as he saw them. He went over and shook their hands. "All right, you guys," he said. "The colonel will fix you with a plane trip to Crête à Moulin. You know that country, too. But you'd better ride in the same plane with your old boss, Monk."

"Yes, sir," Monk said. "Yes, sir, sure. I'm just the bodyguard Mr. Hanegan needs at that place. But how soon we going, skipper?"

David Lowe looked around at the colonel.

"We'll be pushing off," the colonel said, "as soon as our planes are fueled. The Haitian Guard's already started to close around the place in a skirmish line. They'll put flares for us. If we can see them."

"Fine," David Lowe said.

But Margett's grip tightened on his hand. "Before you go anywhere," she said, "you have to eat. Come on inside; Maria's got a meal waiting for you."

CHAPTER XXIV

HUNDRED ROUNDS A MINUTE

THE plane carrying Margett and David Lowe was flown by a Marine Corps squadron leader. He took the compact, powerful craft up fast over Port au Prince, turned and headed on a compass course for Crête à Moulin. It was near dawn then, and already there was a flush of lilac light over the dark-toned sea. But inland, toward Morne La Selle and the great main range of mountains, hung rain clouds and a thick mist.

"Take plenty of altitude," Margett told the pilot. "You must cross this range before you get near Crête à Moulin. Then you'll have to come down slowly, so that I can make out the terrain."

David Lowe had been staring back and down, watching the other planes of the flight take off and make formation. They rose into place with swift precision, and the air throbbed with the tremendous drive of their motors.

This is history, he thought, history of a sort that's never been made before in the Western hemisphere. The Germans, and the Italians and the Japanese have a complete system of attack without any declaration of war. Now the Germans at least are getting some of their own back; these Marine Corps boys will give Spelke a very large packet of unadvertised grief.

The pilot was climbing the plane again, lifting into the gray drag of fog over Morne La Selle. Minute after minute they kept on through that, unable even to see the other planes of the flight. Then some-

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where above wind moved. The mist rifted, and they were in a corridor-like space turned crimson and gold by the sun.

"Better take what we can get," the pilot said. "The ceiling must be somewhere upstairs."

To come out from the mist was oddly thrilling. The world they entered above was all billowing, sun-flamed cloud, and countless, immense rainbows. "Kind of pretty," the pilot said. "But the stuff is solid for some distance. Do you think you can find Crête à Moulin all right, *mam'selle?*"

"Yes," Margett said, and leaned forward to glance again at the compass. "Just keep the course you're on now for another fifteen minutes. When Brucken and I flew out, the poor boy could hardly see, and I had to read his course for him. I timed the flight, and we were just forty-two minutes from Crête à Moulin to Port au Prince."

"I forgot," David Lowe said, "to ask about Bruecken. What happened to him, Margett?"

"The doctors back in town took care of him," Margett said. "But his face is wrecked for life."

"There's worse souvenirs than that for Nazi service," David Lowe said. He was sitting back in his bucket seat beside Margett, staring up through the fuselage glass into the sun radiance. Then he touched the pilot on the elbow. "Take a look up into the sun," he told him.

The pilot had been intent upon checking his instruments. But his keen upward glance swiftly spotted the planes high against the sun. "None of our outfit," he said. "Those must be Germans, and they're looking for us. Here they come. . . . Just sit tight, folks. If you have to bail out, all you have to do is pull open that fuselage slide, step out and pull your 'chute cords."

IT WAS a squadron of Heinkels that dropped down the sky from that sun vantage. They came in a roaring dive, at first no more than black specks, then silver-clear, their propellors flaring arcs of light.

The Marine Corps planes met them in rapidly climbing counter-attack. The squadron leader cursed once in praise of the German's skill, then swung his plane, touched four flat black buttons beside him. Those were the machine-gun firing buttons, David Lowe knew, for the pieces in the wings and on the cowl. They were firing now; he could see the faint flicker of their flame.

He brought Margett very close to him; tried to cover her body from any possible angle of fire.

The plane was trembling over in a barrel roll, then into a sharp *vrille* climb. Down below, still diving, the German plane that had led the attack was plunged into the mist. "Not sure that I got him," the pilot said. "But it doesn't look as though he's coming back. And the rest of the outfit took care of themselves all right. Now what's our course again?"

Breath came short in Margett's throat. There were bullet holes in a rippling gash all along one side of the fuselage, and a patch of blood was on the shoulder of the pilot's leather jacket.

But the mist was opening below, and she could see a dun-brown, treeless mountain crest, then the glinting loops of a stream she recognized. "Go down," she told the pilot. "Now all you have to do is follow that mountain range the rest of the way."

They descended upon Crête à Moulin in a long, gradual dive. The pilot was being cautious, he admitted to David Lowe. Those Heinkels were fast, and he didn't want to meet more of them here without sufficient fighting altitude.

"Your real worry's their anti-aircraft stuff," David Lowe said. "They've got high-speed guns set all around the field."

"How about this?" the pilot said, his hand on the bomb trip. Then the first anti-aircraft burst broke right behind the plane.

It shuddered through every part. The flat yellow wings slipped up, slipped steeply down before the pilot again caught control. "Quick workers," he said, and climbed the plane with the throttle wide.

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David Lowe stared at Crête à Moulin. The anti-aircraft bursts bunched in broad white barriers beneath, but still he was able to make out the flying field, the house and the tower. The house and the tower seemed deserted. A lot of planes and a lot of men were on the field. The men moved in steady lines from plane to plane, bent with the heavy weights they carried.

"The gold," he said to Margett. "They're getting out the gold."

"Don't worry about it," Margett said. "We can follow them, drive them down before they go far."

David Lowe shook his head. "The air's a big place," he said. "And they've twice as many planes. What's the possibility of getting down there, pilot?"

"Not too good for a while," the pilot said. "Those gunners do their job very well. We'll have to bomb the place from end to end, probably send out a call for more planes."

"By the time that's done," David Lowe said, "Spelke will be gone. He'll be safely on his way to some hidden Nazi field in South America. . . . Hold your buggy steady for a bit, will you? I'm bailing out."

"Why, David?" Margett said. "What can you do down there alone?"

"I don't know," David Lowe said. He was standing up, sliding back the fuselage panel. "But I'll find out."

THE wind knocked him end for end as soon as he raised up onto the fuselage. He hurtled off into space, saw the sky and earth revolve, and then the sky again. Pull your rip cord, he told himself. If you keep this up you'll hit and only bounce once. . . .

A jerk that made his neck snap told him that the parachute was opening. His terrific speed had slackened. Now he had the feeling that he hardly dropped at all. He looked up, and past the white flutter of his parachute saw another one. It was Margett's; she was coming down right after him.

They landed side by side, no more than five yards from each other, and in a clump of pine trees. They fell sprawling on the soft, aromatic mat of needles, tugged themselves loose from the harnesses.

"Margett," he said, gripping her tight, "I did a risky sort of thing in coming here this way. You had no right to follow me. Spelke's lot is sure to have seen us. They'll be over here awfully quick. Now start running. Go back right away in those further woods, and stay there. I've only got a pistol, but you haven't anything to protect yourself."

"Yes, I have," she said, and held up a Colt automatic pistol. "I borrowed this from the pilot. After all, he has four machine-guns, and they should be enough for him. But I'm staying with you, David. Where you go, I go. Crête à Moulin is my home, and Ernst was my brother."

"Then get down flat," David Lowe said. He had turned, brought out his own pistol. "The show's going on at once."

Across the open space between them and the flying field men moved crouched in a skirmish line. They held Spandau guns and rifles. Their first volley made a nickering crack off the trunks of the trees.

David Lowe spaced his shots. He crawled back and forth between the trees as he fired. This is it, he thought. You asked for it, but you didn't mean to include your girl in the bargain. She has no right to die. Then, through the lofty branches and right over them, he saw the Marine Corps planes.

They dived in strafing formation. Their guns were like great, unseen lashes of destruction. Six guns to a plane, he told himself, and each gun fires eight hundred rounds a minute. That will be a bit too much for you, boys.

The German skirmishers had stopped their advance. They were looking blankly up at the planes. There was nothing they could do against that fire. They wheeled, those of them who still lived, and ran back toward their comrades and the anti-aircraft guns.

Margett's face had blanched, and she had lowered her pistol to the ground. "I'd

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never seen that," she said. "I never want to again. . . . But why is it, David? Why is it we must kill?"

David Lowe touched a couple of the cartridge empties beside him. "For one simple reason," he said. "The biggest profit in the world is made from selling those. Take the guns away and there'd be no more war. But now we've got need of them, and we've got visitors."

The Marine Corps planes were zooming into high climbs through the close-smashing anti-aircraft fire. Men worked out onto the wings of two of them, leapt forth to come jerking down below their parachutes.

"Four men," Margett said. "Two from each plane."

"Yes," David Lowe said. "That's Brick Hanegan and Monk, and Hugo and Vaubin. With them, we'll have a pretty good little outfit. The German machine-gunners won't get them; the Marines are starting to bomb the field."

CHAPTER XXV

LAST ATTACK

GEYSERS of smoky orange flame pillared the length of the flying field. The sleek, broad-winged German planes were gone. The German flyers and mechanics wandered stunned and stumbling. Once, in that flaming haze, an anti-aircraft gun was almost directly hit. It whirled crookedly through the air, as small and silly-seeming as a child's discarded toy.

David Lowe found himself howling in a hoarse voice of triumph at Brick Hanegan and the rest as they loped toward him and Margett. He was cheering at the sight of death, he realized; he was elated by the terrible erasure of human beings from the earth. But the men who were being killed out there had ruled the earth by the fear of death for six long years. Now death struck at them in one of their famous lightning strokes. . . .

"Come on," Brick Hanegan called to him and Margett. "The Guard's moving in to take the house. But Spelke and a few more of his outfit are still all right. They're heading past the tower, trying to get into the woods on that side."

David Lowe stared from Hanegan to Vaubin. "You take care of Mam'selle Margett," he said. "The rest of us will go over there and see what we can do to help the Guard."

Old Vaubin slowly grimaced. "Victory is very nice," he said, "and we've waited a long time for it, *m'sieu*. But that Spelke is tough. He'll take a lot of killing. Why not let the Guard do it?"

"Because we started this," David Lowe said. "And we're the men to finish it."

He went forward around the edge of the field with Brick Hanegan at his right, Monk and Hugo at his left. Hanegan had borrowed a Marine Corps pistol, and the two Negroes had Springfield rifles. "I can use this fair enough," Hanegan told him. "Remember the shooting range down in the cellar of the *Courier* building?"

"Yes, I do," David Lowe said. "But it's somewhat different when another man's shooting at you."

The Haitian Guardsmen were going at the double toward the house. They deployed and covered well, David Lowe saw, but their only weapons were their rifles. And the knot of Germans that Spelke led near the tower had machine-guns, automatic rifles and grenades. They charged with furious impact against the Guard.

There was nothing for the Guardsmen to do but give ground. They broke before the German charge, dropped prone and answered as best they could with their rifles.

"Good shots, those lads," Brick Hanegan muttered. "But they'd be a lot better off with a couple of machine-guns."

"Haiti's a small and poor country," David Lowe said. "And they never figured they'd be attacked by the troops of a first-class power. Now keep on your toes. Spelke and about half a dozen of his best men have broken through, are past the Guard."

Some Guard officer waved and called to David Lowe as they went past the wind-

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mill tower, but he didn't stop. Ahead of him, off in the greenish blue breadth of the tobacco field, he could see Maxim Spelke.

He carried a Spandau gun, now turned to fire it. "Down!" David Lowe called. "Get down!"

THEY all got prone except Hugo. He was a little slow, and a slug took him through the thigh. He pitched sidewise into the grass, lay cursing.

"I'm stupid, *m'sieu,*" he told David Lowe. "For an old soldier, that wasn't very bright. But I was figuring I might use this." His hand went into his pocket, came out holding a grenade. "I've been saving it, just for Spelke."

David Lowe took the thing, gripped it tight. "We'll have to leave you here," he said. "The Guard will pick you up when they're done at the house. I guess, though, Monk, you'd better stay here and get a bandage on him."

"I'll bandage him quick, skipper," Monk said. "I'll do the best bandage job you ever saw on any man, if you'll give me the chance to get out there and pitch that apple at Spelke. Don't forget I ain't been in this business for quite a time. I just been in the hospital, countin' the days an' the hours an' the minutes until I could join up with you again."

"All right," David Lowe said. "Spelke's spread out his bunch there at the edge of the field, and he's waiting for us to advance. Go up ahead and pitch your grenade. But don't get yourself killed. You're a man we like to have around."

Monk's spatulate, powerful fingers wrapped closely about the grenade. He slung his rifle over his shoulder, started at a slow crawl through the tobacco plants.

The Germans were out of sight now, huddled in an irrigation ditch at the far side of the field. But they were watching every move here, David Lowe knew. Spelke must be almost insane with the recognition that all his plans had been defeated, and yet that would only make the man more dangerous. When Monk had asked for the grenade, he had risked his life.

The black man went with extreme care. He slewed right, then left, cleverly using each depression and slight rise in the ground. No shots came from the Germans; they were completely silent. Too silent, David Lowe thought, for men supposed to be in retreat. They were aware they were being followed, and they waited just to make their retreat secure.

The Germans began to fire a second or so before Monk threw the grenade. Monk was forced to rise up onto his knees to make the toss, and by then the bullets were kicking all around him.

The grenade went in a high arc, exploded instantly it met the ground at the edge of the irrigation ditch. But Monk had dropped over on his back, was twitching with the pain of a wound.

David Lowe rose and ran full tilt, unaware Hanegan was right behind him. But nobody shot at them. Just one man rose out of the smashed earth of the ditch, and he was Maxim Spelke. He staggered as though stunned, reeled away into the forest.

Monk's wound was through the chest. He lay with his hands clamped to it as David Lowe and Hanegan reached him. "Guess I go back to the hospital," he gasped. "But I guess about six of them fellas goes to the buryin' detail. Don't you bother with me, skipper. You go on, and get Spelke."

David Lowe looked quickly back at the house. There was no more sign of fighting there. Details of the Guard were moving about, but only to gather up their own and the German wounded. He bent down and examined Monk's wound, then bandaged it with shirt strips. "I'll have to leave you, sport," he said. "But your boss will stay here with you until you're picked up by the Guard."

Hanegan stared at him. "I had the hope," he said, "that I'd be right in at the death when Spelke got it. But you seem to know what's best."

"I know," David Lowe said, "a bit more about hunting the guy than you do. And if you stay here, one of us can write it."

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HE FELT very afraid as he went ahead into the forest. He had the premonition that his luck had run out, that he, a man who had never carried a gun until he'd come to Haiti, was no match now for Spelke.

There in the shadows of the tall trees the light was vague, intermittent. He imagined many times that he saw Spelke crouched before him, then realized it was nothing but a bush or a rotted log. Still he wanted to go back, wait for a detachment of the Guard to come with him.

You're no soldier, he told himself. Brick Hanegan had it right when he said you've been playing sort of a super Rover boy for the last few days. Spelke's been trained for this ever since he was a kid. Now he's desperate, wild with hate, and he knows you're after him. He should, because you're walking with about as much noise as a bunch of cows. Be quiet, will you? Take it slow, and slide from tree to tree. . . .

He was doing that when Spelke fired at him. Spelke had the Spandau gun yet, and bits of bark and splintered wood sharply stung Lowe's face. "So," Lowe whispered. "You think it's as easy as that, hey?"

He had suddenly become very angry. But it was a deep and quiet anger, one that pervaded his entire being, made him move with the utmost care. You've castigated this guy and his kind on paper for years, he thought, and it hasn't done much good. You've even tried to kill him in a number of impromptu ways and have always failed.

But now you've got to play better ball. He's an extremely tough egg, and a real force of evil in the world. Analyze the job. Figure out in detail just how and why you'll be able to get him.

He stopped, immobile behind the vast trunk of a mahogany tree, his body blended with the surrounding shadow. Spelke's a professional German soldier, he told himself. Up to now, everything you've done has given him the idea you're a damn' fool amateur. But his nature, all his training, is military.

In his conception, he's a specialist out to finish off a guy who doesn't even know how to shoot very well. But you can; you've learned in this series of scraps with him. So make him show himself, give him the idea he's got you easy, and then let him have it fast.

David Lowe took off his jacket, bunched it up and then tossed it out beyond the protection of the tree. A mocking, harsh sound of laughter came from Spelke. "I've got fifteen more rounds, *Amerikaner,*" he called. "All of them are going into your body. Then I'll have a nice afternoon's walk over the frontier to Santo Domingo."

David Lowe was silent. He didn't make any effort to answer, or to move. The guy's impatient, he thought. He's already counting on getting over into Santo Domingo, and he knows pretty soon the Guard will be out here, looking for both of us.

You have all the time you want. Just stand here and wait until he becomes overanxious. Make sure of just where he is, then make a break for that next tree. But don't go to it, because he'll be figuring that's what you're going to do. Just jump out and back again, and when he fires, fire in return.

There were birds in the forest. They talked to each other in low, musical sounds, and several of them passed in iridescent flight through the sunlight beams between the trees. For a long while that was all David Lowe heard. Then his ears became so adjusted he could tell where Spelke was.

SPELKE was behind a tree about thirty yards from him. The German's high boots made a little creaking noise as from time to time he shifted weight. Then he leaned closer to the tree, and something metallic, his belt buckle or some part of the Spandau gun, scraped lightly against the bark.

Now you know, David Lowe said beneath his breath. Here's when you make your play.

He experienced no excitement. His concentration was too great; every faculty he possessed was gathered to guide him in his

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motions out from and then back to the tree. When he did step forth, it was with complete ease of movement, and only his pistol hand was taut.

Spelke shot at him four or five times, immediately Lowe showed himself in the open. One bullet creased his knee cap, another his wrist. But then he was back behind the same tree again, firing at Spelke.

His pair of bullets caught the man. He heard them hit, heard Spelke fall. There was a gasping curse. The dank, heavy forest smell held the sweet scent of blood now.

Spelke was moving away, further into the forest. He was on his stomach, thrust himself along with the Spandau gun.

David Lowe slowly followed him. He was very sure now that he was to be the victor.

He let Spelke get out of the forest and into a dry stream bed that finally led to a cliff which was part of the ridge below Crête à Moulin.

Big boulders were in the stream bed. Spelke took over behind a number of them in turn. But he had to keep moving. His wounds were too severe for him to pause for any length of time. But when he was within a few feet of the edge of the cliff itself, he stopped.

Far below, hundreds of yards down, was the lush sugar plain. The smoke of peaceful fires rose from that, and the rattle of a *combite* drum, the thin, distant notes of singing voices.

Spelke seemed to be infuriated by the singing. He shoved up from behind the last boulder and fired six more shots at David Lowe. They hammered harmlessly away in ricochet, and Spelke began to curse in a feverish, slightly insane voice.

Don't mind that, David Lowe told himself. Don't let him trick you. He has four, maybe five shots left in his gun. In time, those are going to lead him to attack you. There's nothing else he can do. He's not the kind of man to pitch himself off the cliff in suicide.

It was nearly dusk when Spelke chose to make his attack. The sky was a blaze of radiant color behind him. He appeared gigantic, heroic.

David Lowe let him get quite close, then killed him with a bullet through the head.

Spelke lay as if asleep. His blunt hands had released the gun. He wore no cap, and the sunlight set a dully flickering gleam upon the short-cut hair above the small, dark bullet hole.

The sun was going down blood-red in the west. A wind came out of the valley, and it was cold there on the mountain. David Lowe rose up and started back toward Crête à Moulin. But at the edge of the forest, he turned and looked back for a moment.

Vultures were coming down out of the sky to the cliff. They drifted with the wind, swift and black. In that light, and in his disturbed, aroused memory, they had the appearance of German planes.

EPILOGUE

BRICK HANEGAN had brought champagne in a briefcase. "An old prohibition custom in New York," he told Margett. "Each couple who got married at the License Bureau got a magnum right then and there from the boss. Do you mind, Mrs. Lowe?"

"No," Margett said. "But all these other couples don't seem to have any. They—"

"Here," David Lowe said, and took the bottle from Hanegan. He pulled loose the leadfoil and wire, let the cork go with a snap.

The other couples in the room looked around with startled, anxious eyes. "Let's all have a drink," David Lowe said to them. "Let's have a drink to peace."

He and Margett got the butt of the bottle, and they insisted that Brick Hanegan share that with them. Then they went down and out into the warm September sunlight of Park Row. "I'm leaving you folks," Hanegan said. "But don't forget the Clipper sails on time, Davey. I'll see

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you this afternoon, at Port Washington."

David Lowe and Margett rode up town in a taxi with the slide in the top pulled back. For most of the time, until they were nearly to the hotel, they didn't speak. "You can go back to Crête à Moulin," he said suddenly. "With all that gold, you can make the place finer than before."

"No," Margett said. "I believe it should be left as it is. Crête à Moulin was only made for peace. When Ernst went away to war, the whole place changed. Now I'll wait, and go back there with you."

They had luncheon in their hotel room, high up over Central Park, with the city gray-brown and tremendous out beyond the windows. David Lowe packed his bags sitting on the edge of the bed, throwing in his shoes and suits at random. "I don't know," he said, "whether or not I can make a good job of saying goodbye to you. But this is better than Port Washington."

She took him in her arms again and held his head against her breast. "Oh, darling, darling," she said. "Brick promised to tell you, and I should have. I'm going on the Clipper to Europe with you. We'll face this war together, and when it's over and you're through writing about it, we'll come home."

"Home to peace," he said.

"Yes," she said. "To peace. The people like us, the people who really know, will make them end war."

THE END

Greetings!

Charged with Christmas cheer and good will toward men, our authors have given us such a bountiful supply of fiction this week that there is no room for our old standby, Argonotes. But we couldn't let you get through the book without receiving the salute of the season from us. . . . A Merry Christmas to you!

—*The Argonotes Editors*

Looking Ahead

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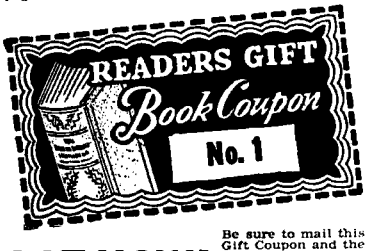

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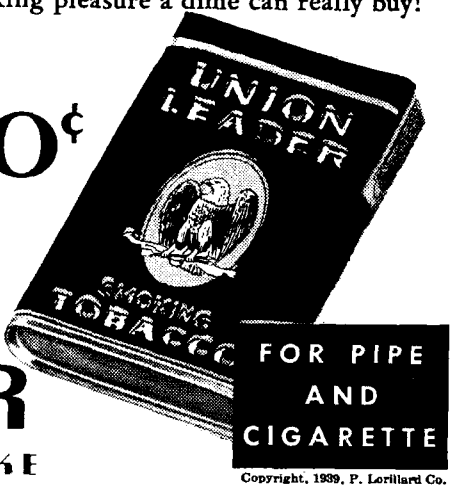

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